

**Edith Wharton
And the Question of Criticism**

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this thesis is my own original work and that no portion of it has been submitted elsewhere for another degree or academic credit.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations	1
Introduction	2
Chapter 1: Threshold	16
Chapter 2: Critical Questions	53
Chapter 3: Critical Practices	126
Chapter 4: Practicing Fiction	202
Conclusion	263
Works Cited	274

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Abbreviations

Works by Edith Wharton:

BG	<i>A Backward Glance</i>
WF	<i>The Writing of Fiction</i>
DH	<i>The Decoration of Houses</i> , with Ogden Codman, Jr.
GS	<i>The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton</i>
IG	<i>Italian Villas and Their Gardens</i>
MF	<i>A Motor-Flight Through France</i>
FF	<i>Fighting France from Dunkerque to Belfort</i>
IB	<i>Italian Backgrounds</i>
HRB	<i>Hudson River Bracketed</i>
UCW	<i>Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings</i> . Ed. Frederick Wegener
Letters	<i>The Letters of Edith Wharton</i> . Eds. Lewis, R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis.
L'ame	<i>L'ame close</i> , full text rpt. in <i>American Literature</i> 66.4. 1994.

Works by Jean Laplanche

NF	<i>New Foundations for Psychoanalysis</i>
'Interview'	'Interview: Jean Laplanche Talks to Martin Stanton'
Translation	<i>Seduction, Translation, Drives</i>
'Copernican'	'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution'
'Ucs.'	'An Short Treatise on the Unconscious'
'Interpretation'	'Interpretation between Determinism and Hermeneutics'
'Transference'	'Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst'
'Seduction'	'Seduction, Persecution, Revelation'
'Source-Object'	'The Drive and its Source-Object: its Fate in the Transference'
'Time'	'Time and the Other'
'Inspiration'	'Sublimation and/or Inspiration'
'Hermeneutics'	'Psycho-Analysis as Anti-Hermeneutics'

Works by others:

CR	<i>Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews</i> . Eds. Tuttleton, James W., Kristen O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray.
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Archive:

Yale	Edith Wharton Collection. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University.
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Introduction

On the threshold of any theory of art its exponent is sure to be asked: "On what first assumption does your theory rest?" (11)

—Edith Wharton
The Writing of Fiction

Edith Wharton lies buried in the *Cimetière des Gonards* in Versailles, France. Nearby is the gravesite of her dear friend, Walter Berry, whose ashes were interred in the *Cimetière* during the autumn of 1927, a decade before Wharton's own death. On the page of a *donné* book, which can be found among her papers at Yale, Wharton has written, 'Oct. 12. 27 The Love of all my life died today, & I with him' (Yale). In a letter to John Hugh Smith, she despaired of Walter Berry's death in similar terms: 'I perceive now that I, who thought I loved solitude, was never for one moment alone—and a great desert lies ahead of me' (*Letters* 504).

Wharton burned all the letters that had passed between her and Walter Berry over their forty-four year friendship, but her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, offers a curious portrait of their relationship:

I suppose there is one friend in the life of each of us who seems not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an *interpretation*, of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul. Such a friend I found in Walter Berry [...] (115; italics mine).

'Interpretation' is an odd choice. It is an unusual and striking way to describe one's dearest friend. Clearly, Wharton means 'interpretation' as high praise, but to speak of another human being as an 'interpretation' of one's self seems strange. And Wharton is not describing just any individual, but the person with whom she felt she was on the most intimate and unguarded terms. To describe the 'Love of all my life' as 'an interpretation' imbues the act with shades of meaning one

would not ordinarily associate with such a cerebral process. Here, Wharton describes an intense emotional relationship with an intimate friend in terms normally reserved for a person's relation to an object of knowledge. For Wharton, it seems, interpretation is a far more complex event, one that involves not only the mind, but the heart, the spirit, and perhaps even the body.

What does it mean to speak of another human being as 'an interpretation' of one's self? More precisely, what does it mean for Edith Wharton to make such a remark? Phrased otherwise, what does 'interpretation' mean to Edith Wharton, and what implications does that have for our understanding of her work? These are the questions that this study sets out to explore. This exploration has sent me from Italian gardens to French cathedrals to contemporary psychoanalytic theory, from the First World War to the richly imagined worlds of Wharton's novels, from her highly restrained memoir to her quixotic critical writings. Such a vast and diverse field of subjects (I'd like to think) would have pleased Edith Wharton, an indefatigable and intrepid traveler whose diverse interests included gardening, interior design, architecture, philosophy, theology, travel writing, and, of course, literature.

Wharton's keen interest in these fields was more than the passing fancy of a dilettante. Once a subject provoked her, whether it be the French countryside, the desert of Morocco, Italian gardens, or American interior design, an accomplished book was usually the result. These books are never the dry treatises of what Wharton herself called 'the specialist.' Rather they are full of the insights, inconsistencies, imaginative fervor, and lived experiences of their author,

replete with Wharton's characteristic whimsy, sharp intellect, scathing wit, and inevitable blind spots.

In short, these books provide rich soil for the scholar and general reader, and in recent years, Wharton's non-fiction has received the attention it deserves. All of which is all by way of saying that the terrain covered in the chapters that follow is by no means untravelled. My exploration of the territory, however, follows a course that, until now, has remained uncharted—namely, a search in these texts for some understanding of Wharton-the-critic. What follows is an attempt to understand how she employs what, in an article published in 1914, she calls 'the critical faculty.' It is an effort to trace this 'critical faculty' through a diverse set of texts, and, in so doing, to gain deeper insight into how Wharton conceived and practiced the art of interpretation. And, for Wharton, interpretation was indeed an art, a process inextricable from the workings of her imagination and her emotions.

My search for a deeper understanding of how Wharton conceives and practices interpretation followed a circuitous route. It began with her 1925 treatise *The Writing of Fiction*, which I'd been led to believe was 'a modest little book that ... does not strain after any startling theoretical originality' (Lewis 521). What I found in its pages was quite the opposite. Far from 'modest,' the volume struck me as a theoretically sophisticated treatment of 'the practice of fiction' that offered striking insights into questions of difference, identity, and interpretive practice (*WF* 7). I found a writer explicitly grappling with questions such as: what does it mean to 're-present' in words, to use those 'signs' that constitute language in order to try to communicate imaginatively with others? (*WF* 16). I also found a

writer who saw little difference between the imaginative and the critical; for Wharton, each was ineluctably enfolded in the other. I was struck by the fact that the questions Wharton doggedly pursues throughout *The Writing of Fiction* are the same ones contemporary theorists and scholars fervently debate: what does it mean to interpret? What kinds of relations are possible between self and other, and is any relationship with an other always an attempt by the perceiving subject to master and dominate?

More specifically, Wharton's notion of a narrator as the 'chosen interpreter' of a 'fictional subject' which can never be contained by the author herself but 'whose essence, the core of it, is other' strongly resonates with Shoshana Felman's discussion of testimony and trauma, where she claims that 'the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him' (*WF* 85; *Testimony* 15).

This study claims that at the heart of the interpretive procedure Wharton advocated and strained to practice is a process of discovery initiated by the provocation of an enigmatic other. As such, her conception of interpretation as a pragmatic event has numerous correspondences with Shoshana Felman's ideas on the ways a text's formal structure both involves us in fantasies of reading and stages scenes of reading that reflect interpretation as *the* mode of textual and human relations. Similarly, the substance and style of Wharton's theorizing in *The Writing of Fiction* also corresponds with Luce Irigaray's ideas on how sexual difference is imbricated in linguistic and rhetorical practice, which, I claim, goes a long way toward explaining why the theoretical insights of this book have thus far been largely misunderstood or neglected. And, finally, Wharton's conception of

interpretation as a mode of cognition—of criticism as a response to the epistemological problem of the work-of-art—resonates most strongly with Jean Laplanche's theory of subjective development, a process he claims is an act of interpretation provoked by an enigmatic other.

Indeed, I found tremendous, and at times uncanny, correspondences between Wharton's notion of what lies at the heart of the fictional enterprise (which, as the ensuing chapters will show, she sees as a predominantly *interpretive* act) and Laplanche's ideas about otherness being topographically dispersed—about alterity lodged in different, though inextricably linked, sites. His theory of the enigmatic message and his conception of interpretation as a process of translation—a process which involves affect, emotion, imagination, and intellect—provided me with a crucial mechanism through which to effect my own translations of Wharton's theories. Specifically, Laplanche's principles provide a useful framework with which to extract and explicate Wharton's theories on textual difference, the split subjectivity that she terms 'creative imagination,' the other that dwells within 'whose essence, the core of it, is other,' as well as the process by which an enigmatic fictional subject provokes the writer to attempt a translation of that subject into a literary text (*WF* 85).

In addition, the procedure Laplanche adopts in reading Freud's work in order to re-valorize Freud's theory of seduction proved immensely valuable in trying to make sense of Wharton's critical writings. Indeed, Laplanche's approach to reading Freud provided me with a way of reading Wharton that allows a complete portrait of Wharton-the-critic to emerge—a portrait that both recognizes her limitations as a critic, while simultaneously amplifying her

strengths. Such an approach reveals and amplifies her subtle critical insights, without unduly repressing those aspects of her critical work that are admittedly narrow and reactive.

What emerges from such a reading is a critic who is at once, like every human individual, closed off and radically open, but who is, in the end, more open and ‘available to the other’ than recent scholarship has often acknowledged (Laplanche, ‘Inspiration’ 47). And just as Laplanche is uncannily suited to elucidating certain strains of Wharton’s work that have previously remained muted, Wharton’s work also opens up and expands Laplanche’s theories in illuminating ways. For instance, Laplanche sees a crucial question implicit in Freud’s ‘Creative Writers and Day-dreaming,’ one that he articulates in his article on transference, but leaves open: ‘Why create *in order to communicate*, and communicate through creating? And above all, why communicate *in this way*—that is, by addressing no-one, aiming beyond any determinate person?’ (‘Transference’ 223). Wharton’s own theorizing on the process of writing fiction responds, in detail, to this question. *The Writing of Fiction* offers crucial insights into what drives an individual to ‘communicate through creating’ and explains how this creative process relies on the maintenance of alterity. Wharton’s ideas about fiction writing and Laplanche’s theories on human subjectivity complement one another, and one of the tasks of the proceeding chapters is to trace and amplify that complementarity.

In other words, my project is in no way an attempt to *apply* Laplanche’s ideas to Wharton. Rather, throughout my investigations and in presenting the fruit

of these investigations here, I have aimed to play the ‘role of interpreter’ as described by Shoshana Felman in ‘To Open the Question’:

The notion of *application* would be replaced by the radically different notion of *implication*: bringing analytical questions to bear on literary questions [...] the interpreter’s role would here be, not to *apply* to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to *generate implications* [...] to explore, bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed *implicate each other*[...] (8-9)

I have structured my explorations of Wharton’s theory of interpretation with such an aim in mind. As a result, the first chapter seeks to establish a working vocabulary with which to discuss my subject. Since the ideas of Jean Laplanche are not widely known, I felt it was important to devote an entire chapter to explaining his ideas in relation to Wharton, whose autobiographical writing (specifically, a fragment she edited from the final version of *A Backward Glance*) wonderfully illuminates Laplanche’s ideas on the primacy of reading in the formation of human subjectivity.

Correspondingly, Laplanche’s notion of the human individual responding to enigmatic cultural messages through either a ‘Ptolemaic’ gesture of closure, in which the individual protects herself against the threat of an other by maintaining the illusion of being the center of one’s own world, or through a ‘Copernican’ move that allows an individual to remain open and ‘available to the other who comes to surprise me’ provide a useful framework for Wharton’s critical writings, whose constant oscillations from closure to openness make them difficult to classify (‘Inspiration’ 47). For this reason, Wharton’s critical writings, specifically those articles in which she explores questions of criticism in the abstract, are the subject of chapter two, ‘Critical Questions.’

Having traced Wharton's exploration of the question of criticism in the abstract, I then examine the degree to which Wharton herself adopts the critical procedure she advocates. In other words, if chapter two is largely devoted to Wharton's exploration of the critical dilemma in the abstract, chapter three, 'Critical Practices,' focuses on concrete instances of Wharton's critical practice (though, as we shall soon see, practice and principle are largely indissociable for her). Since she only wrote two novel reviews (which are discussed in chapter two), I have chosen to explore the question of how Wharton practices criticism by examining the various ways she responds to particular works of visual art in *A Motor Flight Through France* and *Italian Gardens and Their Villas*. Thus chapter three strives to witness how Edith Wharton engaged with individual works of art, both as a cultural observer (or traveler) and as a creator herself, and, more precisely, how she re-presented those engagements for readers. My discussion then moves on to her novel, *Hudson River Bracketed*, examining how the interpretive procedure Wharton sees at the heart of both creative and critical activity manifests itself in her fiction. I have chosen to discuss *Hudson River Bracketed*, because its main character, Vance Weston, is a writer, which makes this novel particularly well suited to my purposes. In particular, Wharton's portrayal of his artistic and critical development illustrates, among many other things, the degree to which Wharton conceived the imaginative and the critical faculties operating together during the scene of creation.

Chapter four, 'Practicing Fiction,' is given over to a detailed discussion of *The Writing of Fiction*. In this final chapter, I endeavor to read Wharton's treatise on fiction writing by employing the very critical procedure that she herself advocates. That is to say, I attempt to follow Wharton's exhortation that critics

take each individual work on its own terms, listening to ‘what particular thing’ this particular book ‘is trying to be’ and attempting to evaluate it accordingly (UCW 125). In the process of reading *The Writing of Fiction* in such a way, I follow the concentric circles of her theorizing as they ripple outwards, tracing the correspondences between Wharton’s notion of ‘stylization’ and Laplanche’s theory of translation, between Wharton’s conception of the ‘creative imagination’ and Laplanche’s notion of ‘benevolent neutrality,’ between Wharton’s notion of a writer corresponding with ‘that *other self*’ that dwells within and Laplanche’s theory of the unconscious as an internal, alien other. In addition, reading *The Writing of Fiction* via the reading practice Wharton herself advocates highlights the degree to which her theoretical insights have been overlooked due to this alternative strategy she employs. Attempting to take *The Writing of Fiction* on its own terms, I claim that, far from being ‘confused and repetitious’ as one scholar has stated, this treatise simply follows an spiraling, discursive theorizing process (Vita-Finzi 46). As such, the style and substance of Wharton’s treatise are consonant with Irigaray’s explorations into the question: how can a person speak from an alternative point-of-view without having her speech be dismissed as pathological, or, in this case, ‘confused and repetitious’?

In the opening chapter of *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton asks, ‘What is originality in art?’ then decides ‘[p]erhaps it is easier to define what it is *not*’ (DH 11). Let me now take a moment to do the same and articulate what this thesis is not. It is not an attempt to place Wharton’s ideas and practices into a larger historical context. Such a study would be of tremendous interest and value, if only to see whether her theoretical and critical ideas can be situated within a

larger American tradition or whether she falls more firmly into a French continental one. But neither time nor space allows me to undertake such an exploration here. This study is neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. As with any travel itinerary, certain destinations have been omitted, some hurried past, while others will be explored at length. Selection, as Wharton never hesitates to remind us, is necessary. I have chosen to treat those critical writings by Wharton that explicitly address questions of literary criticism (how should a critic approach a text? what did Wharton believe a reviewer's guiding principles ought to be? and so on). I have made these articles my primary focus for several reasons. First, aside from *The Writing of Fiction*, such articles (for instance, 'The Criticism of Fiction,' 'The Great American Novel' and so on) are the most explicitly theoretical pieces she wrote, and insofar as my project involves gaining insight into Wharton's theories on interpretation, such articles provide crucial insights. Secondly, her critical articles that explicitly address the question of literary interpretation (particularly 'The Criticism of Fiction') are rarely treated as primary subjects in their own right. They are most often subordinated to a supplementary position in scholarly arguments about her fiction. In treating Wharton's articles that explicitly address abstract questions of literary criticism (such as, what is a novel? or what constitutes an 'American' novel?), I aim to allow a portrait of Wharton-the-critic to emerge from her own dogged attempts to wrestle with these vexing questions, as opposed to patching one together out of statements taken from various sources. This is my first aim: to allow a portrait of Wharton-the-critic to emerge from a holistic approach to each critical article in which she explicitly addresses questions of criticism.

The second aim of this study is to illustrate the degree to which Wharton's ideas about how to interpret shade and color nearly every aspect of her life and work. For this reason, I have chosen a range of material—critical essays, travel writings, a novel, and *The Writing of Fiction*. Insofar as breadth and scope are crucial to my claim, I have felt it necessary to range widely over as many different forms of her writing as I can, as opposed to focusing solely on fiction or solely on those works that can be discretely classified as 'critical'. It is because I want to demonstrate the wide ranging ways in which Wharton employed the interpretive approach she advocated that I do not treat all the material contained in *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, that I only discuss one of her novels, and that I have attempts to trace her interpretive efforts through a diverse range of subjects and contexts. That is to say, insofar as my claim is that this interpretive procedure is not limited to those texts that are explicitly critical, my own selection of material had to range beyond that which is explicitly critical as well.

An unfortunate effect of this choice is that her novels receive much less attention than I would have liked. However, I also felt that this thesis would do greater service to Wharton studies by turning my attention to those pieces which have received scant treatment over the years. As a result, I have foregrounded works such as her 1914 article 'The Criticism of Fiction,' her 1934 article on Proust, and *The Writing of Fiction*, while allowing her fiction a slightly lesser role. As a tremendous lover of her novels, such a course of action was not my first choice, but, in the end, my own preferences are secondary to the demands of my subject, which, in this instance, required scope and breadth of treatment.

Additionally, in the nine years since Wharton's critical articles first appeared together in a single volume, a detailed, book-length study devoted solely to Wharton-the-critic has yet to emerge. That is not to say her criticism has been ignored. Rather, it has most often been quoted piecemeal by scholars making arguments about other aspects of her work, as in Nancy Bentley's 'Wharton, Travel, and Modernity' (2003) and Frederick Wegener's "Form "Selection," and Ideology in Edith Wharton's Antimodernist Aesthetic' (1999), both of which put Wharton's 'The Great American Novel' to interesting, and very different, uses. But despite such occasional treatment in articles, scholars have been largely silent on the subject of Wharton-the-critic. The only book-length survey of Wharton's critical prose remains Penelope Vita-Finzi's *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction* (1990), even though the subsequent publication of Wharton's critical writings in a single volume calls some of Vita-Finzi's conclusions into question.

In his 1996 introduction to *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, Frederick Wegener remarks that what emerges from her critical writings viewed together is 'an Edith Wharton even more complex and mercurial than the figure with whom we have become so familiar in the past generation of scholarship' (45). That is, indeed, what I have found, although the ways this complexity manifests itself proved quite surprising. Wharton, even in her later years, was far more quixotic in her reactions, less consistently reactionary and narrow, than we have come to assume. Thus, in a sense, this study picks up where Wegener's overview leaves off, as I attempt to add shade and light to this 'complex and mercurial' figure, providing precise details about *how* these complexities manifest themselves by tracing the various paths her mercurial tendencies followed.

Finally, despite the incisive and plentiful scholarship that has emerged on Wharton over the past two decades, no one has yet addressed the sophisticated and insightful *theorist* that I found hard at work in the pages of *The Writing of Fiction*.¹ Over the years, scholars have sought Wharton in the drawing room and in the library (Singley); they have followed her motor-flights across France and Italy (Schriber, Wright); they have documented and analyzed her war-time activities and sympathies (Price, Olin-Ammentorp); they have drawn connections between her ideas about interior design and her fiction (Vita-Finzi); they have debated her attitude towards race, class, politics, and gender (Ammons, Bauer, Wegener, Sensibar). But nowhere has the idea been put forth that Edith Wharton was a prescient *theorist*, one grappling with many of the same vexed questions those of us involved in literary studies wrangle over today. It is this Edith Wharton, the one who took me so utterly by surprise when reading *The Writing of Fiction*, whom I wish to introduce to my readers. And because Wharton-the-theorist is inseparable from Wharton-the-gardener, the interior designer, the author, the critic, the friend, the ‘life-wonderer’ and even the lover—one glance at the Fullerton letters shows how doggedly she mustered all her interpretive powers in order to try and comprehend his infuriatingly enigmatic behavior—this study could be three, four, five times its present length.

Indeed, wherever Wharton encountered an enigma, she responded by trying to interpret it as best she could. At their finest, these interpretations took the form of novels. But Wharton’s responses to life’s mysteries also took the

¹ One scholar has characterized Wharton’s contribution to the theory of fiction as ‘slight,’ remarking that ‘she had little to add to doctrines already expressed in James’s prefaces,’ a claim that diverges quite sharply from my own experience (Bell 289).

form of letters to her friends, ruminations on works of art she encountered in her travels, instructive books on gardening and a rereading of her own life through memoir. And, correspondingly, when her friends were at their finest, in Wharton's own eyes, they became interpretations: an 'expansion' of her own self—not quite separate, yet still, like that other self that dwells within the breast, at the core, other.

Chapter 1

Threshold

When we hear enigmas talked of I propose this procedure: to move from the enigma *of*, to the enigma *in*, and then to the function of the enigma *in*. [...] [W]hen one speaks [...] of the enigma *of* femininity (what *is* woman?), I propose [...] to move to the function of the enigma *in* femininity (what does a woman want?).' (255)¹

—Jean Laplanche
'Time and the Other'

And it is because Claude Silve has the art of keeping us, from the first word of her tale to the last, in our daily world, yet not of it, that I have wanted to say a word of her delicate achievement. (*UCW* 250)

—Edith Wharton
Forward to *Benediction*

At the age of nine, Edith Wharton fell ill with typhoid. The local doctor told her parents nothing could be done and that their daughter would soon die. Only the ministrations of another physician, who happened to be passing through town and was prevailed upon to examine the girl, saved her life. Her fever fell, and the young Wharton began to recover. During her convalescence, she read voraciously. One of her books contained a 'super-natural' tale—a story that turned out to be, in Wharton's own phrase, 'perilous reading' (*GS* 275). In the original manuscript of her autobiography, Edith Wharton describes how reading this uncanny story occasioned a relapse, which brought her, once again, 'on the point of death' (275):

This one [book] brought on a serious relapse, and again my life was in danger; and when I came to myself, it was to enter a world haunted by formless horrors. I had been a naturally fearless child; now I lived in a state of chronic fear. Fear of *what*? I cannot say—and even at the time, I was never able to formulate my terror. It was like some dark undefinable

¹ Italics are original. As a rule, all italics within quoted texts are the author's italics, not mine. Hereafter, my italics alone will be indicated. Ellipses in brackets indicate omissions I have made for brevity's sake. Ellipses without brackets are the author's and original to the quoted text.

menace forever dogging my steps, lurking and threatening; I was conscious of it wherever I went by day, and at night it made sleep impossible, unless a light and a nurse-maid were in the room. But, whatever it was, it was most formidable when I was returning from my daily walk [...] while I waited on the door-step for the door to be opened, I could feel it behind me, upon me; and if there was any delay in the opening of the door I was seized by a choking agony of terror. It did not matter who was with me, for no one could protect me; but, oh, the rapture of relief if my companion had a latch-key, and we could get in at once, before It caught me!

This species of hallucination lasted seven or eight years, and I was a 'young lady' with long skirts and my hair up before my heart ceased to beat with fear if I had to stand for half a minute on a door-step! (GS 275-6)²

According to Wharton, an act of reading plunged her body back into fatal illness. Interestingly, she describes this reading-triggered relapse as a time of subjective split and alienation. Recovery involved a return to self: 'when I came to myself, it was to enter a world haunted by formless horrors. I had been a naturally fearless child; now I lived in a state of chronic fear' (276). Her act of 'perilous reading' occasions an illness that drives the young girl *elsewhere* (275). But she does return/recover. And upon her return—to physical health and to self—she finds this self radically altered. She is no longer the same 'fearless child' she was before. She is now someone dogged by 'an unreasoning physical timidity' that did not exist before this event of 'perilous reading' (275). In addition, Wharton claims that her relapse 'obliterated [...] the torturing moral scruples which had darkened my life hitherto' (275). In short, a book of stories produces major psychic shifts in its young reader—shifts that are invasive, traumatic, and entrenched. According to Wharton, a textual encounter changes

² This passage was part of the original manuscript for her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, but Wharton repressed it from the final version of her autobiography. The passage remained unpublished until 1973, when Scribners included it in a volume of her collected ghost stories, *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*, under the title 'An Autobiographical Postscript.'

the nature of her fears, wreaks havoc on her daily routine, alters her imaginative life, and profoundly influences her moral outlook.

But can reading really cause such trauma? Can textual encounters produce profound subjective change, and, if so, what implications might this have on certain privileged, and highly charged, sites of reading—in particular, the act of critical interpretation? Phrased otherwise, if certain textual encounters have the uncanny power to provoke the dramatic psychic shifts described above, does this not place a heavy responsibility on critics who undertake interpretations of texts for the wider public, not to mention educators who assign such disturbing texts to their students? But first I would like to explore the initial question: can a book of stories really effect psychic change, or is Wharton's account just the idle fancy of an aging author penning her memoirs?

Psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche sees reading as a prime mover in the development of human subjectivity. According to Laplanche, human subjectivity results from an infant's attempt to read the enigmatic messages that are constantly bombarding it. These messages extend beyond language and include any gestures or actions (or lack of action—refusing to pick up a crying infant, for instance) performed in an infant's presence. For Laplanche, this is the primal scene and the source of an individual's psyche: a helpless human infant who must depend on an external, alien other to meet its survival needs and consequently must struggle—and fail—to interpret the gestures performed and words uttered by that alien other.

Laplanche claims that this situation is universal: any human being who has survived past infancy has done so only through receiving 'foreign aid'—by

having its survival needs met via assistance from outside for a relatively long period of time, as compared with other mammals ('Copernican' 75-8). As a result of this dependence on 'foreign aid' administered by an external alien other, there exists a profound asymmetry in the primal situation, that is to say, in the relation between a human infant and her care-taker(s). Care-takers have the ability to meet their own bodily needs, while a physically helpless (*hilflösigkeit*) infant does not. But more important than this biological asymmetry is the asymmetry that ineluctably *accompanies* it—the asymmetry of what Laplanche calls the 'communication situation,' which arises from the fact that any person capable of taking care of an infant has an unconscious, while the infant being cared for as yet does not ('Interview' 332). As a result, there will always be 'more' representation on the side of the adult whose communications are marked by conscious *and* unconscious significations, while the infant's responses to these communications, as it attempts to get its needs met, are *not* marked by unconscious significations because infants do not yet have an unconscious ('Interview' 333).³ In other words, caretakers will by no means be in full control of what they say and do while caring for an infant, any more than they would be in total control during everyday life; indeed, an adult's actions and words in this situation, as in life generally, would often be compromised by her unconscious (the adult's own

³ Here is where elements of contingency enter Laplanche's theory of the primal scene. Which of a caretaker's gestures and words are 'impregnated' with 'more' and what, precisely, that 'more' consists of will depend on the individual caretaker and his own particular relation to his own unconscious—in short, one person will make different Freudian slips than another. For this reason, Laplanche rejects more hermeneutic aspects of psycho-analysis that depend on a pre-established code. See Laplanche's 'Psychoanalysis as Anti-Hermeneutics' in *Radical Philosophy* 79 (1996): 7-12. and 'Interpretation between Determinism and Hermeneutics: a Restatement of the Problem', pp. 158-159.

internal, opaque other)—compromised in the sense of the psycho-pathology of everyday life (slips of the tongue and so on):⁴

To address someone with no shared interpretive system, in a mainly extra-verbal manner: such is the function of adult messages, of those signifiers which I claim are simultaneously and indissociably enigmatic and sexual, in so far as they are not transparent to themselves, but compromised by the adult's relation to their own unconscious. ('Copernican' 79-80)

This asymmetrical communication gives rise to the unconscious.

According to Laplanche, when infants (literally, *in-fans* speechless) attempt to metabolize, assimilate—or read—the various gestures and utterances of their caretakers, there will always be an excess, something that *exceeds* this helpless creature's limited capacity to assimilate.⁵ This metabolic excess is crucial, because it is this excess that comes to constitute the unconscious and thus shape each individual's psyche. Laplanche explains: 'that which eludes the child's first attempts to construct for itself an interhuman world' gets repressed in the form of 'thing-like presentations' which come to constitute the unconscious ('Ucs.' 93).

⁴ Laplanche conceives otherness as topographically dispersed. Returning to Freud's use of two distinct terms for the other—*der Andere* (human) and *das Andere* (thing)—Laplanche locates alterity in different, though inextricably linked, sites: 'there are two others, latent in Freud. Freud speaks of *der Andere*, that is the other person, and *das Andere*, which we could not translate except as the other thing, [...] that is the unconscious which is the remainder of the other's messages' (*Translation* 68). Because alterity occupies multiple sites, the other is, according to Laplanche, 'irreducible to a projection coming from the subject' ('Seduction' 196). As a result, an enigmatic address initiates an elliptical, spiraling movement marked by 'an essential dissymmetry' ('Transference' 228)—a movement that propels the one who receives this enigmatic message 'back along the threads of the "other": the other thing of our unconscious, the other person who has implanted his messages, with, as horizon, the other thing in the other person, that is, the unconscious of the other, which makes those messages enigmatic' ('Time' 258). Thus, for Laplanche, alterity is not binary, but exponential. Any external other (*der Andere*) who sends an enigmatic messages also has an unconscious (*das Andere*) with which she, too, has an asymmetrical relation, whose source is another external other (*der Andere*), and so on and so forth: 'there is the primordial split, which means quite simply that *the other is other*, but with this paradox or amphibology: he is other than me because he is other than himself' (Laplanche, 'Transference' 220-1).

⁵ These attempts to assimilate, those inadequate translations of enigmatic messages that result in the unconscious, unfold via a complex process involving a metabolic translation/repression mechanism that involves both primary and secondary repression. For a detailed explanation of this process see Laplanche's *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, pp. 130-3.

In other words, those aspects of the adult message that the infant *cannot* translate, metabolize, or assimilate are *repressed* in the form of ‘an internal foreign body’ or ‘psychical other’ (‘Copernican’ 64-5). Thus the unconscious is an ‘alien inside me, and even one put inside me by an alien’ (‘Copernican’ 65).

The term Laplanche uses to describe these messages that the infant cannot translate, metabolize, or assimilate is *enigmatic message*. He means ‘enigmatic’ in a highly specific sense (‘Copernican’ 78-9). An ‘enigmatic message’ is not a puzzle or riddle that can one day be solved by learning and applying the proper code, linguistic or otherwise (‘Source-Object’ 126). A message is ‘enigmatic’ insofar as it is *doubly* ‘compromised’—that is, ‘opaque to its recipient and its transmitter alike’—though opaque, it should be noted, in different ways (‘Seduction’ 169):

the originator of the enigmatic message is unaware of most of what he means, and to the extent that the child possesses only inadequate and imperfect ways to configure or theorize about what is communicated to him, there can be no linear causality between the parental unconscious and discourse on the one hand and what the child does with these on the other (‘Interpretation’ 160).⁶

For Laplanche, any address characterized by an excess of message, one doubly compromised on both sides of the exchange (at the site of transmission and the site of reception), is *enigmatic* insofar as it harbors an irreducible, interrogative kernel—a question neither sender nor receiver can ever completely

⁶ This is what keeps Laplanche’s theory from being determinist. Recipients of enigmatic messages will assimilate or metabolize these messages in different ways—ways the sender cannot anticipate or control. Because of the dislocating and reconfiguring aspects of the repression process, the unconscious is *not* the adult-other implanted in the child. This is an outright rejection of Lacanian formulations such as ‘there is no Other of the other’ or ‘the child is the symptom of his parents.’

answer: '[a]n enigma is not just to ask a question of which you have the answer; it is a question for which even you are not to have an answer' (*Translation* 89).⁷

Laplanche also describes these 'doubly compromised' messages as *enigmatic signifiers*. An enigmatic signifier is something which signals—an address that lacks a signified while still retaining its interpellative function. In other words, an 'enigmatic signifier' does not *signify of*, but does *signify to* ('Copernican' 73-4; 78-9). Edith Wharton's uncanny story of reading illustrates this dynamic. Although what haunts her remains in close proximity ('forever dogging my steps, lurking, threatening'), and although she is 'conscious of it' day and night, 'it' remains 'undefinable' (Wharton *GS* 276). The word 'it' appears seven times in her description of the reading-triggered relapse, and by the end of this passage, 'it' becomes a big 'It.' Even after forty-odd years of writing, this celebrated and prolific author cannot describe her fear. All she can provide is a vague placeholder, 'It'—a radically enigmatic signifier unbound to any signified. 'It' addresses, solicits, and haunts her; but 'It' does not *mean*. 'It' *indicates*, but 'It' does not *designate*. 'It' *signifies to* her, without *signifying of* anything. Conceived in terms of 'It's interrogative function, this enigmatic signifier contains a question Wharton cannot answer—'Fear of *what*? I cannot say.'⁸

⁷ Not everything is an enigmatic message, and not all messages are equally enigmatic. An enigma arises from a communication situation, a situation of address; as a result there is always a degree of contingency depending on a sender's and a recipient's relation to one another and to their own respective unconscious: 'there is no enigma [...] in the objectivity of the data' ('Seduction' 171).

⁸ An enigmatic message is not reducible to the polysemy of language. Laplanche is not arguing that because all signifiers are slippery, language is inherently enigmatic and traumatizing. For Laplanche there is always a situational, contingent component that either creates an enigma or does not. The ghost story Wharton reads is enigmatic and traumatizing to her, because it plunges her into a communication situation that forces her to confront enigmatic messages that she cannot fully bind, translate, or metabolize. As a result of this 'excess of message'—which might not have been as excessive or as traumatizing to a different reader—the originary situation is reactivated and her psyche altered.

Laplanche claims that human subjective development arises from such encounters: 'the development of the human individual is to be understood as an attempt to master, to translate, these enigmatic, traumatizing messages' (Laplanche, 'Interpretation' 165). Laplanche's choice of the word 'development' as opposed to 'formation' is significant. As Wharton's story illustrates, these inadequate attempts at translating enigmatic messages *do not cease* once infancy has ended and the unconscious has been constituted. After all, Wharton was nine-years old when recovering from typhoid and reading her book of ghost stories, and the experience profoundly altered her subjectivity. The girl who emerges from her encounter with the ghost stories is not morally, imaginatively, or subjectively the same one who first turned back the cover of this book. Indeed, Laplanche insists that the unconscious is not a fixed entity, since 'the individual will certainly not subsequently stop translating, as long as he lives' ('Interpretation' 161). Thus human subjective development can continue to transpire throughout life via encounters with enigmatic messages that an individual must confront without being able to fully comprehend, translate, metabolize or bind.⁹

Laplanche argues that encounters with enigmatic texts can provoke psychic development, because these communication situations have the power to reactivate the primal scene ('Theory' 664). Like an infant's attempts to respond

⁹ Laplanche emphasizes continually that this process (attempting to translate or metabolize enigmatic messages) is not purely cognitive, thus his use of multiple words to describe the activity. Generally, when forced to use one word to encompass this complex affective-cognitive activity, Laplanche prefers 'translation': 'I would rather talk of translation than reading, interpretation or comprehension.' ('Anti-hermeneutics' 10). However, for Laplanche, translation is not a purely intellectual activity: 'it would be a misunderstanding of the word [translation] to regard it as a merely ideational process' since it also involves 'affective, imaginative, intellectual' elements ('Interpretation' 161).

and assimilate the messages of an external, alien other, the act of reading is always a *response*. It is a response to the provocation of the text, and as such, the initial and primary vector—the force that initiates the event—comes from an other that is topographically dispersed (a textual other; *das Andere*, which is always already a message, an address from another other, the text's creator, *der Andere*).¹⁰ Every act of receiving the cultural message and attempting to assimilate it is a response. A book, written by a distant, unknown other, sits on a shelf; its presence invites, solicits, and provokes. An individual may or may not choose to become its reader. But the moment one does choose to do so, the act of reading is a *response* to that initial address. And because any act of reading always begins as a response to this initial provocation, the primary vector in the event is *centripetal*. A reader allows herself to be drawn into orbit by the gravitational pull of the textual address, an event which '*repeats* the originary situation of the human being' ('Copernican' 83).¹¹ As a result, enigmatic texts have the potential to re-shape an individual's psyche—much as the young Edith Wharton was changed by reading the ghost stories.

Because of this radical potential to effect psychical changes, Laplanche claims that 'the site of the cultural, as the site of an enigmatic interpellation, with many voices and ears, remains privileged' ('Transference' 233). Thus Laplanche draws a direct correspondence between the relational asymmetry that characterizes the human infant's relation to the adult world *and* the asymmetrical

¹⁰ See footnote 3 for an explanation of Laplanche's discussion of Freud's use of these terms. I am suggesting a direct correspondence between the adult's relation to the enigmatic messages *and* a text's relation to the one who creates it (artist, author, creator, whichever term one prefers).

relation between all human subjects and the enigmatic cultural messages that bombard them. The underlying structure of these experiences is the same, for they both transpire in transference.

Transference, according to Laplanche, is not a spontaneous, auto-generated phenomenon. It is a dynamic that can only be provoked by the enigmatic address of an other: 'transference, like faith, comes from the other' ('Seduction' 193). Nor is it a static construction, reducible to a fantastic projection of the subject. Transference is a *dynamic*: a situational response on the part of an individual to encountering the enigmatic address of an other. Because the address of another initiates the process, the primary vector of transference is centripetal, which means that a 'basic Copernicanism' underpins any transferential event ('Seduction' 193). Transference, according to Laplanche, is not limited to psychoanalysis: 'Transference, as I conceive it, is characteristic of the analytical situation and of some other specific *intersubjective constellations* which all have in common the fact that they reproduce and renew the [primal] situation' ('Source-Object' 131).

For Laplanche, one such '*intersubjective constellation*' is culture: 'If one accepts that the fundamental dimension of transference is the relation to the enigma of the other, perhaps the principal site of transference, "ordinary" transference, before, beyond, or after analysis, would be the multiple relation to the cultural, to creation or, more precisely, to the cultural message'

¹¹ This dynamic extends to all cultural encounters. Watching a film, viewing a painting, listening to music, and so on, are all—like reading a book—*responses* to the enigmatic address of an other that is topographically dispersed.

(‘Transference’ 222).¹² Insofar as we exist in culture, we are constantly forced to confront enigmatic messages that we cannot fully assimilate: ‘the biological individual, the living human, is saturated from head to foot by the invasion of the cultural, which is by definition intrusive, stimulating and sexual’ (‘Transference’ 225).

But simply because human beings exist in culture does not guarantee that people’s psyches will be reconfigured by cultural encounters. Plenty of people can read a book, watch a film, listen to a symphony, or view a painting and remain utterly unchanged. Even if a text is ‘enigmatic’ to a particular individual, Laplanche argues that, in fact, a subjective shift in that person would be the exception, not the rule. To bind signifiers to clear signifieds, to domesticate the enigma of the other, this is the pre-dominant human instinct: ‘the dominant tendency is always to relativize the discovery, to re-assimilate and reintegrate the alien’, since ‘the ego is not master of its own house, but it is, after all, at home there nonetheless’ (‘Copernican’ 65; 67). Most people respond to enigmatic texts with what Laplanche calls a ‘Ptolemaic’ gesture that reverses the centripetal vector of the initial address into a centrifugal one. The end result of this activity is that the receiver of an enigmatic message is not translating the enigma of the message itself; rather, she is simply translating her old translations: ‘The

¹² By ‘culture’ Laplanche means all attempts to communicate that explicitly and intentionally address those ‘beyond oneself, but above all going *towards* another who is no longer determinate [...] Through this dimension, cultural production is situated from the first *beyond all pragmatics*, beyond any adequation of means to a determinate effect’ (‘Transference’ 223-4). Thus an advertisement, which has a determinate pragmatic aim (selling a product) and a group of distinct addressees (consumers that belong to a particular target market), would not be considered ‘culture’ by Laplanche. Yet his notion of ‘culture’ is still quite expansive, including ‘cave-paintings, idols’ and ‘all attempts to communicate to distant others beyond a merely ‘pragmatic aim’: ‘What can be isolated here as characteristic of the cultural is an address to an other who is out of reach, to others ‘scattered in the future,’ as the poet [Mallarmé] says’ (‘Transference’ 224).

translator is the human individual [...] Usually, however, unlike the child, the adult merely translates his old translations, so to speak, turning out ‘rehashes’ of them’ (‘Interpretation’ 161).

All of which circles back to the second question posed at the outset of this paper: what implications do Laplanche’s claims have for criticism? If, as Laplanche claims, individuals most often respond to enigmatic messages by attempting to domesticate the enigma of the other and close off the psychic threat alterity poses to the self, and if, as Laplanche also claims, encounters with enigmatic texts also effect psychic change, this places a heavy burden on critics—those readers who not only receive the message of a text, but also endeavor to communicate interpretations of that text to others. What, exactly, is the nature of that burden? What pitfalls, specifically, must critics beware of? According to Laplanche, when plunged into a transferential situation, an individual is confronted with the hollow of an enigma—an uncanny space that is pure indication, an enigmatic message that interpellates and addresses but does not designate. Most often, recipients will respond to an enigmatic text by instinctively filling in that hollow with a ‘plenum’—re-productions of her own tried and true explanations, binding the signifier to a signified that then reifies her own critical or professional identity. In other words, critics all too often offer interpretations which, perhaps in spite of their best efforts, simply end up translating their old translations.

In ‘Woman and Madness: the Critical Phallacy,’ Shoshana Felman relates a classic example of this kind of ‘Ptolemaic’ criticism. Analyzing the critical commentary that brackets Balzac’s *Adieu* in a Gallimard/Folio pocket edition, she

demonstrates how two scholars, Pierre Gascan and Patrick Berthier, effectively *rewrite* Balzac's story by focusing their analyses entirely on a section of historical backstory, despite the fact that this element comprises but *one-third* of Balzac's narrative.¹³ In addition, by adopting a criterion of alleged 'realism' and labeling Stéphanie's madness as 'super-natural,' they excise Balzac's main character (a madwoman) and replace her with protagonists who are soldiers in the Grand Army. The madwoman inhabits, according to these critics, 'a state of semi-unreality' linked to 'the presence of the invisible,' which renders her inexplicable and outside the purview of discussion (qtd. in Felman, 'Phallacy' 6). As a result, Felman argues, critical commentary meant to situate Balzac's *Adieu* in a wider literary context ends up repeating Philippe's 'cure':

in erasing from the text the disconcerting and ex-centric features of a woman's madness, the critic seeks to 'normalize' the text [...] making the text a reassuring, closed retreat. [...] By reducing the story to a recognition scheme, familiar, snug and canny, the critic, like Philippe, 'cures' the text of precisely that which in it is incurably and radically uncanny. ('Phallacy' 10)

In Laplanchean terms, these scholars import a tidy 'realist' hermeneutics in order to reverse the initial centripetal pull the textual enigma (a madwoman) exerts on them and bring Balzac's *Adieu* back into orbit around their own pre-

¹³ *Adieu* recounts tragic events in the life of Countess Stéphanie de Vandières, a woman who endures such hardship and suffering while accompanying her husband and lover (Philippe de Sacy) across Russia during the Napoleonic Wars that she loses her reason. Divided into three sections, *Adieu* opens with Philippe crossing paths with his former lover, Stéphanie, whom he has been unable to locate amid the chaos and devastation of the French countryside. The second section jumps back in time to recount the horrific events that occasioned Stéphanie's madness—the suffering she endured during the Grand Army's retreat, the scene of her separation from Philippe, and the death of her husband. The final section rejoins Philippe after his discovery of Stéphanie, who does not recognize her former lover, because she has lost memory. Joining forces with a doctor, Philippe attempts to restore Stéphanie's sanity by re-enacting the scene of their war-time separation, thus forcing her to recognize Philippe, which, he assumes, will restore her reason. It works: she recognizes her former lover, smiles, says *Adieu*, then dies.

conceived notions of what a great literature ought to be. Consequently, the interpretive project becomes an exercise in narcissistic re-centering: '[f]or the "realistic" critic, as for Philippe, the readable is designed as a stimulus not for knowledge and cognition, but for acknowledgement and *re-cognition*, not for the *production* of a question, but for the *reproduction* of a foreknown answer' (10).

Here Felman sets up an important distinction between *knowledge* and *cognition*, on the one hand, and mere *acknowledgement* and *re-cognition*, on the other. Acknowledgement and recognition, Felman suggests, are not enough in order for cognition to transpire. At best, they are incomplete processes; at worst, exercises in narcissism. When subjected to such 'therapeutic' critical closure, Felman argues, both text (Balzac's *Adieu*) and woman (the enigmatic Stéphanie) are granted existence only as mirrors—flat surfaces on which a perceiving subject is reflected back to himself, thereby reassuring him of his own presence-unto-self, identity, unity, wholeness.¹⁴ It is this inability to perceive an other (feminine or textual) without reducing it to a reflection of the perceiving subject that constitutes the 'critical phallacy' that Felman sees being played out on 'the critical as well as the literary stage': 'the "realistic" critic thus repeats, in turn, his allegorical act of murder, his obliteration of the Other: the critic also, in his own way, *kills the woman*, while killing, at the same time, the question of the text and the text as a question' (10).

Felman sees these critics reading only the story they want to read in Balzac's *Adieu*, while repressing that which is ex-centric to that desire (a

¹⁴ Here, she is drawing explicitly on Luce Irigaray's interrogation of Western philosophy and the male imaginary it generates and perpetuates.

madwoman), even though her experiences comprise the bulk of Balzac's narrative. In Laplanchean terms, Balzac's novel installs these critics in transference via the enigma of the madwoman, and they respond with a 'Ptolemaic' interpretive procedure that reverses this centripetal vector, thereby killing 'the question of the text and the text as a question' ('Phallacy' 10).

Felman's text thus opens its own questions: 'how *should* we read? How can a reading lead to something other than recognition, "normalization" and "cure"?' (10). Phrased otherwise, how can critics avoid their instinctive 'Ptolemaic' tendencies when plunged into a de-centering encounter with an enigmatic text? Felman seems to be advocating a critical approach that involves *cognition* as opposed to *re-cognition*—a process that moves beyond simple *acknowledgement* towards some degree of *knowledge*, away from 'the reproduction of a foreknown answer' towards 'the production of a question' ('Phallacy' 10). But what would such a cognitive process look like, and what role might cultural encounters play in it?

In 'The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze,' Megan Boler proposes an answer. Like Felman, Boler is concerned with the way individuals interpret texts. Questioning the aim embraced by many contemporary educators of getting students to 'identify' with an 'other' via assigned texts, she writes:

in popular and philosophical conceptions, empathy requires identification. I take up your perspective, and claim that I can know your experience through mine. [...] What is ignored is what has been called the 'psychosis of our time': empathetic identification requires the other's difference in order to consume its sameness. [...] Popular and scholarly (particularly in the analytic traditions of philosophy) definitions of empathy seem

unwittingly founded on this ironic ‘psychosis’ of consumptive objectification. (258)

Boler’s description of ‘identification’ resembles Felman’s critique of ‘acknowledgement.’ It is not enough, they both argue, simply to acknowledge or identify with an other. Like Felman, Boler sees the issue in Lacanian terms—a self (reader) projecting onto an other (text). Boler supplements her Lacanian-inspired critique of ‘empathetic identification’ with examples from her own teaching experience. Quoting from student papers on Art Spiegelman’s *MAUS*, she demonstrates how these students achieve empathetic identification (or acknowledgement of the other), while simultaneously reducing the textual other to a reflection of self. One student praises Spiegelman’s animal metaphors for allowing her to feel ‘more comfortable’ while confronting the horrors of the Holocaust, since she was not ‘bombarded by feelings of rage or guilt’ (qtd. in Boler 260). Like Felman’s Gallimard/Folio critics, this student adopts a reductive criteria that turns *MAUS* into a ‘reassuring, closed retreat’, a canny space that is safe and re-cognizable (Felman, ‘Phallacy’ 10).

Boler deftly illustrates how such interpretations foreclose any possibility of cognition or knowledge, since identification allows students to avoid confronting the cognitive and imaginative limits one encounters when faced with a trauma like the Holocaust. Responding to a course lecture given by a philosophy professor—who argued that the horror of the Holocaust is, to a great degree, *unimaginable*—Boler’s students expressed ‘an almost unilateral offense’: ‘they deeply wanted to believe that their identification was sufficient’ in trying to understand history (261). Boler’s experience demonstrates that mere

identification enables readers to occupy positions of 'heightened detachment rather than intimacy' with a text, while simultaneously promoting interpretations that are 'more a story and projection of myself than an understanding of you' (260; 257). All of which circles back in the same troublesome terrain of Felman's article: Is interpretation—whether by scholars or students—ineluctably an attempt to see the self reflected in a textual other? Is the critical gesture always a 'Ptolemaic' response, a centrifugal reversal that fixes the text into orbit around each recipient's 'foreknown answer'?

Boler does propose a cure for the 'passive empathy' and 'consumptive' identification she diagnoses in her students' responses (258-9). As she sees it, the main problem with these interpretations is that they are decontextualized (267). Boler's notion of context, however, is an odd one—not 'history' *per se*, but rather, a reader's 'own historical moment' (267). Accordingly, she proposes an alternate interpretive strategy called 'testimonial reading,' which:

[...] requires a *self-reflexive* participation: *an awareness first of myself as reader, positioned in a relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance of reading*. Second, I recognize that reading potentially involves a task. This task is at minimum an active reading practice that involves challenging my own assumptions and world views' (263; italics mine).

She continues in the same vein: 'We finally arrive at the key distinction between passive empathy and testimonial reading: in testimonial reading, the reader *recognizes herself* as a battleground for forces raging . . . to which [she] must pay attention' (265).

Such an approach, however, does nothing but replace Felman's critical phallacy with a historicist one—though it is an odd view of history, to be sure,

focusing as it does on learning to ‘question the genealogy of any particular emotional response’ within oneself (266-7). Such an approach does not alter what Boler herself terms the ‘psychosis of consumptive objectification’ or the ‘troublesome terrain of identification’, since it still forces texts to function only as a mirror (258):

As I examine the history of a particular emotion, I can *identify* the taken-for-granted social values and structures of *my own historical moment* which *mirror* those encountered by the protagonist. Testimonial reading pushes us to *recognize* that a novel or biography *reflects* not merely a distant other, but *analogous* social relations in our own environment, in which our economic and social positions are implicated. (267; italics mine) ¹⁵

This procedure reduces texts to flat surfaces that consist solely of the economic, social and political structures that traverse them—a mimetic reflection of the ‘historical moment’ a given reader occupies (267). The text is still a mirror in which a reader seeks her own reflection, but that reflection is now a fetishized notion of context, that is to say, those power structures that enmesh a reader. Even more troubling is her assumption that any textual encounter involves an ineluctable master/slave dynamic, installing individuals in a ‘safe distance’ above the text (263): ‘Recognizing my position as “judge” granted through the reading privilege, I must learn to question the genealogy of any particular emotional response’ (266-7). And yet, her entire article rests on the premise that textual encounters can effect a ‘shift in existing power relations,’ thereby helping to achieve greater ‘social justice’ (255). But how is such a shift possible, if cultural encounters automatically place individuals in a privileged position of ‘judge’ over

¹⁵ Tellingly, Boler figures her hypothetical reader in the first person, a grammatical Ego, I.

a submissive (potentially guilty?) text? Receiving and attempting to interpret a cultural message is a transference event. As a result, a textual encounter cannot occasion subjective shifts without placing individuals on the receiving end of the textual message at risk, making them vulnerable to the trauma of the text's enigma—much as Wharton was vulnerable to the enigmatic message of her ghost stories.

In addition, what has happened to that unique creature, *MAUS*? What happens to those elements of a text that do not serve to throw readers back onto themselves in a reflexive cycle of self-interrogation? 'Testimonial reading' requires that the perceiving subject (reader) submit *MAUS* to a critical project(ion), since a testimonial reader's primary 'task' is finding socio-economic reflections of self.¹⁶ The narcissism inherent in this approach seems no less extreme than that of Felman's Balzac scholars. Texts are still submitted to the therapeutic designs of their readers—rewritten by a 'Ptolemaic' pedagogical agenda that demands they serve only as reflective objects mirroring contemporary social relations. Teaching students to reduce texts to mere reflections in which to *recognize* one's own socio-economic position is nothing more than the critical phallacy in drag—veiled beneath the theoretical buzz-words of 'other' 'contextualization' and 'difference.' Such an interpretive strategy relies far more on *re-cognition* of self than *cognition* of a textual other, on generating *acknowledgement* of my 'own historical moment' rather than *knowledge* of the particular text in question. It demands the '*re-production* of a foreknown answer' ('I am situated in power relations') rather than 'the *production* of a question'

(Felman, 'Phallacy' 10). Such an approach forecloses any potentially traumatic encounter with the enigma of a text, which, in effect, prevents students from achieving the very kinds of shifts a teacher hopes a course's assigned texts will produce.

'Ptolemaic' critical responses come in all shapes and sizes. We often think we are allowing texts to de-center us, when in fact we are only consolidating our identities (personal or professional) via interpretive gestures that effect centrifugal re-centering. Some acts of critical foreclosure are obvious, as in the case of Felman's Balzac scholars. Other times, such 'Ptolemaic' gestures are more subtle, as in the instance of Boler's 'testimonial reading.' The simple fact of confronting an enigmatic message—of being installed in transference—does not guarantee a break in the reflexive cycle of what Felman calls acknowledgement and recognition. Thus, simply because literary interpretation transpires in transference does not mean it is inevitably a 'Copernican' event. Indeed, it is, like all encounters with enigmatic messages, more likely to be a 'Ptolemaic' one. Laplanche himself acknowledges the unique and tricky position critics occupy, but goes no farther than simply noting that 'the recipient-analyst (or simply 'art-critic') [...] is, in turn, caught between two stools: the enigma which is addressed to him, but also the enigma of the one he addresses, his public' ('Transference' 224). But he goes no farther than this passing acknowledgement of the critical dilemma. All of which begs the question: how can critics maintain the 'basic Copernicanism' (to use Laplanche's phrase) that underpins any event of reading in order that criticism might yield cognition and knowledge as opposed simply to

¹⁶ Such an aim assumes an individual can step far enough outside those relations in order to see them.

providing a vehicle for translating one's old translations? In other words, what might 'Copernican' critical responses to enigmatic texts look like?

The nine-year-old Wharton's response to the ghost stories is certainly 'Copernican,' for she does not fill in the hollow of the text's enigma. Much as she might passionately desire to reverse its centripetal force, she cannot answer the question of the text's enigma ('Fear of *what*? I cannot say'). As a result, 'It' remains unbound to any signified ('undefinable') and continues to exert its traumatizing, de-centering pull on her psyche for years. But how desirable is this outcome? She suffers nightmares, experiences strange paralyzing phobias, and, most troubling of all, she burns books: 'till I was twenty-seven or eight, I could not sleep in the room with a book containing a ghost-story, and I have frequently had to burn books of this kind because it frightened me to know that they were downstairs in the library!' (GS 276).

Perhaps more 'Ptolemaic' responses to enigmatic texts are preferable. And yet, as Shoshana Felman points out: 'If reading has historically been a tool for revolutions and of liberation, is it not rather because, constitutively, reading is a rather risky business [...]?' (*Sexual Difference* 5). If we are safe, we are not truly reading. Nor, I would suggest, are we engaging in a process that might lead to cognition and knowledge. Leaving oneself open to the enigmatic message of a text is a dangerous and risky business, and the results are far from predictable. But that is where the pedagogical imperative enters, for if Wharton's story of reading is an example of a 'Copernican' response to a text, it is also a cautionary tale. It warns of the psychic dangers that can befall a young girl who is plunged into a transference situation without any guidance or external structure to

contain the effects.¹⁷ What the nine-year old Wharton lacks, in other words, is a classroom—a group of peers with whom to discuss the stories she read and a teacher who can guide such a discussion. She lacks a container: an environment in which the affective charge released by reading traumatizing texts can be channeled into some constructive outlet whereby it might be *partially bound* without foreclosing subjective change. But is such a middle ground possible? So far the only choices seem to be unbridled and dangerous ‘Copernican’ openness that leads to midnight book-burnings or canny, ‘Ptolemaic’ essays in which readers deposit a reflection of self into the hollow of a textual other.

Yet there is, according to Laplanche, a ‘third vicissitude’ (‘Inspiration’ 45). Once an individual is installed in transference, de-centered by the gravitational pull of an enigmatic message, there are, he claims, three possible outcomes. First, ‘the message can be left untranslated’; this would be Lacanian foreclosure (45). Such is the fate of Balzac’s enigmatic madwoman in the hands of Gascan and Berthier, who dismiss her as ‘super-natural’ and thus outside the purview of critical discussion, declaring her, in effect, untranslatable. Second, the message can be ‘translated, apparently without remainder. But only apparently, for the untranslated remainder is repressed and is therefore nothing to the ego’ (45). Such is the fate of Spiegelman’s *MAUS* when submitted to ‘testimonial reading,’ where all elements of a text that do not mirror a reader’s social relations

¹⁷ Laplanche conceives of the analytic situation as a container, or tub (*le baquet*), which encloses a space wherein transference is installed via the presence of the analyst, an external other whose offer of analysis reactivates the originary situation. It is my contention that the pedagogical situation provides a similar transferential tub, a container that can both provoke transference and help contain its destructive potential. See ‘Transference’ 225-33.

are repressed, producing critical interpretations that *appear* to be treating the enigmatic message of the text, but are, in fact, repressing that which is ‘nothing to the ego’ (that is, nothing to the reading ‘I’ that is situated in power relations and must find reflections of those relations in the text). The ‘third vicissitude’ that Laplanche identifies still involves a repression, but it is repression of a different order, one that ‘*preserves the sharp goad of the enigma*’ (‘Inspiration’ 45).

‘Copernican’ criticism, I would suggest, follows this ‘third vicissitude’ by achieving some measure of critical closure, while simultaneously maintaining ‘the dimension of the enigma despite the avatars of repression’ (45). Interpretation inevitably entails *some* measure of repression, but, according to Laplanche, certain repressive mechanisms are more constructive (subjectively) than others. Most repression involves total closure against that which is repressed, effecting a ‘Ptolemaic’ reversal in which the ‘untranslated remainder’ is fully exiled: ‘This is precisely repression, which Freud defined as not-wanting-to-know’—a repression that re-centers the receiving individual (reader, critic, student, etc.) within a familiar cycle of acknowledgement and recognition, foreclosing knowledge of the enigmatic message and cognition of the textual other (45). A constitutively productive—and more difficult—kind of repression involves maintaining the gravitational pull of the ‘untranslated remainder,’ whose force would be allowed to continue exerting pressure on the individual, reminding the ego that ‘what I don’t know [...] I sense—endlessly—that I don’t really know’ (45). In other words, a ‘Copernican’ response to enigmatic messages would entail a preservation of the ‘centripetal vector’ of the enigma insofar as its ‘*sharp goad*’ would continue to prod the recipient (reader, critic, student) ‘endlessly’ thereby allowing

that individual to remain 'available to the other who comes to surprise me' (47).

Laplanche argues that such a process is what Freud was trying to illustrate in *Leonardo* and is properly termed 'sublimation' (45). 'Copernican' criticism would, then, attempt to achieve sublimation in Laplanche's sense of the term.

Both 'repression' and 'sublimation' are thus different responses to the transferential situation. While the 'critical phallacy' of Felman's Balzac scholars and the 'testimonial reading' of Boler's students demonstrate 'filled-in' transference, Wharton's 'Copernican' response to the ghost stories illustrates what Laplanche calls 'hollowed-out' transference, wherein an individual, confronted by the hollow of an enigma, confronts that hollow with another hollow ('It'—the 'undefinable' unbound signifier) rather than filling the first interrogative hollow with her own 'foreknown answer.' The problem with what the nine year old Wharton achieves is that the process of subjective change is, from a psychoanalytic perspective, incomplete. According to Laplanche, 'hollowed-out' transference ought *not* to be maintained indefinitely. Maintaining such a radical state of openness would be akin, he argues, to leaving a patient unsutured in the wake of an operation. Psychic suturing, however, does not involve total closure:

An analysis that closes up wounds: what could be more legitimate?
[...]

But what I think I know is that analysis, sometimes, maintains a type of *opening-up* [...] This opening-up can be maintained, transferred into other fields of otherness and of inspiration. This is what must indeed be called the transference of the transference: a transference of the 'hollowed-out' transference, of course—in other words, the transference of the relation to the enigma as such. ('Inspiration' 50)

The critical project, then, becomes a balancing act—a set of procedures that unbind and rebind, dissolve and resolve, aiming, in the end, to leave an

unresolved, or untranslated, excess whose '*sharp goad*' will continue to prod readers 'endlessly.' Such an approach would have an impact upon interpretive practices in the classroom and scholarship at large. Pedagogically, teachers must demand some degree of critical closure from students, whose written analyses of literary texts will necessarily bind certain signifiers. But there is another crucial field of interaction between text and student, a site of interpretation and transference marked by a far more 'Copernican' dynamic, namely, the classroom. It is here, through discussion of assigned texts, that the 'basic Copernicanism' of enigmatic cultural encounters can be maintained. Here, the question of the text ought to be left open, which means that the pedagogical imperative of class discussions becomes prodding students to de-translate whatever old translations they insert into the hollow of a text's enigma, while, at the same time, creating a container that helps to keep the affective charge such unbinding can unleash from spilling outwards in destructive ways—as it did with the young Edith Wharton. In fact, in the same repressed autobiographical fragment in which she told of her typhoid relapse, Wharton bemoans this lack: 'If I had only had a tutor—some one with whom I could talk of what I read [...] My childhood and youth were an intellectual desert' ('Life and I' 1089).

Like the clinical situation of analysis, the pedagogical situation provides an essential 'counter-balance to this force of unbinding, this liberation of psychical energies' that encountering enigmatic texts can unleash (Laplanche, 'Transference' 227). As such, like the 'tub' (*le baquet*) of psychoanalysis, the classroom 'offers itself as a guarantor of constancy; of containment [...] of support. It offers the constancy of a presence, of a solicitude, the flexible but

attentive constancy of a frame' for a method that is 'precisely decomposition, which is steered according to the current, or the currents, of the primary processes. It ana-lyses, that is, it dissolves' ('Transference' 227).¹⁸

'Copernican' criticism might be conceived the same way. Such a critical procedure would attempt to interpret by dissolving then resolving up to a point, and that point would be the '*sharp goad*' of a literary text's enigma(s) that would be allowed to continue to prod readers by reminding them that what they don't know they sense 'endlessly' that they 'don't really know' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 45). In other words, a critic can offer a constructive *response* to the question of a text without closing that question off. A response need not be an answer. A 'Copernican' approach to textual interpretation is thus propelled not by a drive towards hermeneutic closure—*what does it mean? what must it designate?*—but by an interpellative, centripetal pull that initiates a re-opening—*what does it indicate, or strain towards?* Such approaches would engage in a process of questioning initiated by the enigma(s) in a text and offer responses to that question (or set of questions) without filling the text's interrogative hollow with a 'foreknown answer.' A critic faces the hollow of a text's enigma—that question for which neither text nor its author is to have an answer—and responds in such a way that her own subsequent text (critical treatment) yields a further question which remains open, thereby confronting the

¹⁸ In the interests of space, I can only touch briefly on what implications Laplanche's ideas might have on pedagogy. That said, Shoshana Felman's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* arrives at something quite close to what I would describe as 'Copernican' pedagogy, though she does so not through recourse to Laplanche, but via Lacan. Whether Laplanche's ideas would result in a different set of pedagogical procedures than Felman describes in her chapter 'Education and Crisis or the Vicissitudes of Teaching' (pp. 1-56) merits exploration elsewhere.

critic's own readers with a hollow that can be transferred to an alternative site of inquiry, aiming to achieve what Laplanche calls 'the transference of the transference.' But what would such 'Copernican' criticism look like? What forms might it take? 'Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy' is one example of such an approach. Shoshana Felman opens her article with a series of provocative questions:

Is it by chance that hysteria (significantly derived, as is well known, from the Greek word for 'uterus') was originally conceived as an exclusively *female* complaint, as the lot and prerogative of woman? And is it by chance that even today, between woman and madness, sociological statistics establish a privileged relation and a definite correlation? (2) ¹⁹

Felman then proceeds to discuss these 'sociological statistics' as presented in Phyllis Chesler's book *Women and Madness*, confronting her readers with the fact that women are far more likely than men to be life-long psychiatric patients. She then shifts her discussion to Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* whose controversial ideas about identity, otherness, and sexual difference caused acrimonious debates among feminists throughout the 1980s and continue to divide scholars today.²⁰ Her discussion of these provocative texts leads Felman to conclude that the 'complementarity' and 'incompatibility' of Irigaray's and Chesler's ideas illustrate 'the difficulty involved in any feminist enterprise' ('Phallacy' 4). This act of closure does not rest as a tidy 'answer,' but rather, it gives rise to another series of questions:

The problem, in fact, is common to the revaluation of madness as well as to the contention of women: how can one speak from the place of the

¹⁹ While perhaps such questions seems less than provocative today; her article was first published in 1975, when such feminist discussions were hardly commonplace in literary scholarship.

²⁰ See *Diacritics* special issue, *Irigaray and the Political Future of Sexual Difference*, Spring 1998, vol. 28, issue #1.

Other? How can the woman be thought about outside of the Masculine/Feminine model? How can madness, in a similar way, be conceived outside of its dichotomous opposition to sanity, without being subjugated to reason? How can difference as such be thought out as *non-subordinate* to identity? In other words, how can thought break away from the logic of polar oppositions? (4)

Thus a provocation, presented via a series of questions, yields a response which provides some measure of closure, which, in turn, initiates another series of questions. The above-quoted questions introduce her discussion of Balzac's *Adieu*, thereby establishing an interrogative framework for her literary analysis. As a result, literary analysis becomes a *response* to a provocation, a response to the hollow of an enigma, thereby maintaining the initial centripetal vector the act of reading itself initiates.

Felman repeats this spiraling dynamic—questioning, responding, questioning, responding—throughout the article. The hollow of an enigma yields to a discussion that provides partial critical closure, which then yields to further questioning, or, phrased otherwise, to the transference of the hollowed-out transference. Felman's analysis spirals through several revolutions of this kind, explicitly repeating the centripetal dynamic that underpins the act of reading a literary text. In so doing, Felman re-enacts the centripetal dynamic that any act of reading entails, thereby installing her own readers in transference. She does this by confronting us with the hollow of an enigma via a series of questions, then offering responses that provide *some* degree of critical closure without completely filling that hollow with a 'foreknown answer.'

By presenting her reading of *Adieu* as a response to a provocative series of questions, her article echoes the de-centering experience of reading Balzac's

story, which itself is characterized by a disorienting array of enigmas and questions: 'The reader, too, cannot get his bearings: deluged with questions, at the same time deprived systematically of information, not really knowing *who* is speaking much less about whom, he is in turn as *lost* in the text as the two protagonists are in geographical space' (7). The result is analytical sublimation in Laplanche's sense of the word, that is to say, a partial binding of an enigmatic signifier that still '*preserves the sharp goad of the enigma*' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 45). Her analysis of Balzac's *Adieu* responds to the questions Balzac's text inspires—questions about the relationship between madness and women—without closing them off entirely with tidy answers. What provokes her interpretive response (her analysis of Balzac's story) is the larger set of questions: 'how can one speak from the place of the Other? [...]' and so on (qtd. above). Thus the form her critical interpretation takes ends up *repeating* the centripetal dynamic that first initiates the act of reading a literary text. More importantly, however, Felman's analysis achieves some measure of closure (suturing), while still maintaining the '*sharp goad*' of the enigma, thereby creating the most favorable conditions for cognition and knowledge to transpire in her own readers, those to whom this interpretation is addressed.

To understand how her analysis dissolves and resolves in a way that creates conditions conducive to cognition and knowledge of the textual other (Balzac's *Adieu*), we must examine how she interprets the enigma in the text—namely, the character of Stéphanie—the madwoman whose identity Balzac presents as an unanswerable question. According to Felman, in the opening pages of Balzac's story 'a recurrent question emerges: "She? Who?"' [...] this

preliminary inquiry takes on an abstractly emphatic and allegorical character [...]
From the beginning, however, the question reaches a dead end... The allegorical question will thus remain unanswered. The text, nonetheless, will play out the question to its logical end' ('Phallacy' 7).

Correspondingly, Felman's reading of *Adieu* plays out its own unanswerable questions (one of which is Stéphanie) to their logical ends. In doing so, her article does not repress the enigma of Balzac's madwoman (as the critics Gascan and Berthier do), nor does her analysis forcibly bind this enigmatic signifier (Stéphanie, or enigmatic hollow 'She? Who?') to a stable 'proper' signified (as Philippe, Stéphanie's lover, does). When faced with an enigma in Balzac's text, Felman does not succumb to Lacanian foreclosure, nor does she interpret (or translate) the textual enigma 'apparently without remainder' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 45). Rather, Felman's analysis follows Laplanche's 'third vicissitude,' achieving some degree of critical closure while allowing the enigma of the madwoman to be fruitfully maintained:

Through this paradoxical and disconcerting ending [Stéphanie's death & Philippe's suicide], the text subverts and dislocates the logic of representation which it has dramatized through Philippe's endeavor and his failure. Literature thus breaks away from pure representation: when transparency and meaning, 'reason' and 'representation' are regained, when madness ends, so does the text itself. Literature, in this way, seems to indicate its impuissance to dominate or to recuperate the madness of the signifier from which it speaks, its radical incapacity to master its own signifying repetition, to 'tame' its own linguistic difference, to 'represent' identity or truth. Like madness and unlike representation, literature can signify but not *make sense*. ('Phallacy' 9-10)

Thus, for Felman, the question of Stéphanie points towards 'the blind opacity of the lost signifier unmatched by any signified, the pure recurrent difference of a

word detached from both its meaning and its context' (9), which, in turn, yields crucial insights into the ways literature can signify, while simultaneously breaking away from 'pure representation.' Thus Felman still translates (or reads) Stéphanie, but her reading maintains the gravitational pull of her 'untranslated remainder' ('She? Who?'), whose force continues to exert pressure on readers, reminding us that 'what I don't know [...] I sense—endlessly—that I don't really know' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 45). 'Copernican' criticism knows the limits of what it can know. Any claim to answer the 'She? Who?' question would be an act of reductive, Ptolemaic closure. Rather than forcing Stéphanie to *signify of* something 'apparently without remainder' but only apparently, Felman's analysis explores those questions that the enigmatic Stéphanie points towards, which, for Felman, involve: what is the relation between women and madness? What does it mean to speak from the place of the Other? And so on. Laplanche describes such an interpretive practice as an attempt 'to move from the enigma *of*, to the enigma *in*, and then to the function of the enigma *in*' ('Time' 255). By exploring the enigma in Balzac's text (Stéphanie) and then the function of this enigma, Felman's interpretation follows Laplanche's 'third vicissitude' by achieving that difficult balance between dissolving and resolving. Her article dissolves previous 'translations' that have been inserted into the hollow of the text's enigma, which, in turn, allows her to resolve certain questions regarding literature's seeming ability 'to signify but not make sense.'

But this claim about literature's unique ability to signify without mastering the enigmatic nature of its signifiers is not the end of her article. Rather than conclude with a response to the set of questions posed at the outset, Felman uses

the above-quoted claim to initiate yet another critical turn. Circling back to her earlier discussion of the 'critical phallacy' of the Gallimard/Folio critics, she opens another set of questions:

From this paradoxical encounter between literature's critical irony and the uncritical naïveté of its critics, from the confrontation in which Balzac's text itself seems to be an ironic reading of its own future reading, the question arises: how *should* we read? How can a reading lead to something other than recognition, 'normalization' and 'cure'? How can the critical project, in other words, be detached from therapeutic projection? (10)

By ending her analysis with 'this crucial theoretical question,' Felman leaves her readers with the hollow of an enigma. She invites us to transfer the hollowed-out transference her article has installed to another site of inquiry by picking up her question ('how *should* we read?'). In other words, she invites us to transfer the transference. Her conclusion thus seeks to provoke a response, a further turn, or revolution, around the question of the other. Her conclusion solicits a reply from her own readers.

Thus 'Copernican' criticism might also be conceived as a correspondence, an epistolary exchange among multiple parties (texts, readers, critics, and so on) wherein there is 'an essential dissymmetry in the relation' (Laplanche, 'Transference' 228). A literary text will always, like the enigmatic messages a caretaker unwittingly sends to an infant, contain more than it 'knows.' It will necessarily contain questions for which even it does not have answers, which, one

could argue, is precisely what makes a text 'literary.'²¹ The interpretive enterprise would thus be conceived as responses to those enigmas—responses to the questions a literary text asks for which even the text itself is not to have an answer. And the most constructive (subjectively) analytic responses would offer some measure of critical closure, while still maintaining the '*sharp goad*' of the enigma, allowing readers to remain open to 'the other who comes to surprise me'—namely, the literary text itself (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 47). How many critical articles inspire us to return to the literary text being analyzed and (re)read it? How many scholarly interpretations propel us back into orbit around the text-in-question, re-opening us to 'the other who comes to surprise me'? Which works of criticism do not simply provoke a rebuttal, but invite a transference of the questions they inspire to an alternative site of inquiry? How often is literary analysis not simply a debate between critics in which each one struggles to have the last word, but an on-going correspondence among texts, readers, authors, and critics?

The idea of criticism as an epistolary exchange is not new. Nor is Shoshana Felman the first and only critic to engage in what I have called

²¹ In *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, Felman makes a similar point via Freud: 'a knowledge that does not know what it knows and is thus *not in possession of itself*. Such, precisely, is the essence of literary knowledge. [...] [L]iterature, for its part, *knows it knows but does not know the meaning of its knowledge*, does not know *what it knows*' (92). My point, arrived at via Laplanche, whom Felman never mentions, is not so much that literature '*does not know the meaning of what it knows*' but that it addresses readers in much the same way adult messages address human infants, installing us in transference and thereby offering a prime site for cognition and knowledge and that, by extension, literary criticism must endeavor to facilitate cognition and knowledge not by answering the question in a text (assigning signifieds to enigmatic signifiers), but by exploring the terrain those enigmatic signifiers open onto. Arguing for this sort of interpretive procedure via Laplanche, as opposed to Lacan, avoids some of the more circular arguments a Lacanian framework sometimes creates—primarily, the question as to whether any act of interpretation is inherently a projection of the reading subject.

‘Copernican’ criticism.²² There have been precursors, critics who have conceived of interpretation as an act of correspondence marked primarily by a process of questioning, a dialogue propelled by the interrogative impulse, an inquiry wherein the centripetal vector of the text that initially provokes an act of reading is not reversed by an attempt to interpret the text in question.

One of the earliest attempts to theorize a ‘Copernican’ approach to interpretation can be found in Edith Wharton’s critical writings. A careful examination of her criticism reveals a conception of the interpretive dynamic remarkably similar to the one Laplanche sees at the heart of subjective human development. The following chapters will attempt to amplify correspondences between Laplanche’s theories and those Wharton articulates in order to establish that Edith Wharton was not only a sophisticated and insightful thinker, but also a radical one. As Frederick Wegener has observed in his introduction to her uncollected critical writings, to claim that Edith Wharton theorized at all is ‘hardly a commonplace of Wharton scholarship’ (22). In addition, Wegener notes the degree to which the content of much of her criticism makes it difficult ‘to locate a genuinely feminist sensibility in Wharton’s work,’ since Wharton herself ‘seems to have been incapable, at nearly every point in her long career, of imagining women as critics or portraying any women in such a role’ (44, 15). Tracing the troubling degree to which Wharton saw criticism as a ‘masculine’ endeavor to

²² As I conceive it, ‘Copernican’ criticism includes any response to an enigma in a text that attempts to transfer that enigma to an alternative site of inquiry and explore a question in the text without closing it off, thus encompassing certain texts beyond those traditionally classed as ‘criticism.’ For instance, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel, is also an act of ‘Copernican’ criticism insofar as it responds to the enigma in a literary text (the madwoman in *Jane Eyre*) by transferring that enigma to an alternative site of inquiry without answering the question in that enigma by binding her to a signified.

which she would be, due to her gender, inherently ill-suited and inadequate at practicing, Wegener convincingly argues that she ‘thought very little of her own efforts in critical writing’ (15). He then notes a corresponding silence and hesitation on the part of Wharton scholars, who seem to have followed Wharton’s own cue on the matter, resulting in relatively little attention being given to her critical writings. Wegener views this scholarly quietude as paradoxically ‘endorsing the preconceptions to which Wharton herself evidently assented regarding women as critics’ (46).

Since the publication of her previously uncollected critical writings in 1996, more attention has been given to her criticism. But this attention most often takes the form of glancing observations made in articles devoted to other topics. Michael Nowlin asserts that some of her essays ‘should warrant consideration in histories of theoretical writings about the novel in English’ as well as in ‘histories of Arnoldian humanism in America’ (447-8). In *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, Carol Singley makes a similar point about Matthew Arnold’s influence on Wharton’s ‘Fiction and Criticism’, an essay that was unpublished during her lifetime, but now appears in *The Uncollected Critical Writings* (Singley 5-6). In addition to writing the introduction to this volume, Frederick Wegener has devoted two full-length articles to various aspects of Wharton’s critical identity. ‘Form, “Selection” and Ideology in Edith Wharton’s Antimodernist Aesthetic’ (1999) analyzes her antimodernist tendencies, finding them ‘closely intertwined’ with certain ‘regressive social and political views’ (133). ‘Rabid Imperialist: Edith Wharton and the Obligations of Empire’ (2000) argues that she was an acquiescent and, at times, triumphalist promoter of Western imperialism, an

argument that relies on a passage in her article 'The Great American Novel.' This passage from 'The Great American Novel' has also received attention from Janet Beer Goodwyn and Nancy Bentley, both of whom view Wharton's thinking on modernity as more culturally fluid and politically elusive than Wegener does (Goodwyn 85; Bentley 161-3).

But all these treatments, as valuable and insightful as they are, still treat her criticism as supplementary to her fiction, rather than as a subject in its own right. Aside from Wegener's article on Wharton's antimodernism and his introduction to *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, Wharton's critical works are still viewed piecemeal and used to give color and shape to discussions that focus on her novels. A notable exception is Penelope Vita-Finzi's *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*, published in 1990, which remains the only book-length study of Wharton-the-critic, despite the fact that the subsequent publication of Wharton's critical writings in one volume throws some of Vita-Finzi's conclusions into question. As a result, the significance of Wharton's critical work and its value as *criticism* remain very much open questions. Even more vexing, perhaps, is whether Wharton's criticism helps or hinders scholarly attempts to 'locate any genuinely feminist sensibility in her work' (Wegener, Introduction 46).

The following chapter suggests that, when viewed in light of Laplanche's theory of subjective development, Edith Wharton emerges as one of the first writers to conceive of analysis as a process of questioning, a dialogic, epistolary exchange between self and other in which difference can, and must, be maintained. For Wharton, such a cognitive process is not limited to the critical enterprise, but extends to creative activity and the whole of life itself. As such,

she is one of the earliest advocates for what Shoshana Felman has declared to be at the heart of the feminist endeavor, namely, 'a revolutionized interpretive stance [...] a revolutionary theory of reading: a theory of reading that opens up into a rereading of the world' (*Insight* 9).

Chapter 2

Critical Questions

Rooms may be decorated in two ways: by superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure, or by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out. (1)

—Edith Wharton & Ogden Codman, Jr.
The Decoration of Houses

On 7 January, 1896, Edith Wharton sat down to read the daily papers. An article in the *Newport Daily News* titled ‘Colonial Houses’ sparked her interest, and she penned a lengthy response. Her letter-to-the-editor ran in the newspaper the following day. It was Edith Wharton’s first published piece of criticism.¹

This letter opens with a question, ‘May I beg the space to draw a few conclusions from the article on Newport’s old houses which appeared in your issue of yesterday?’ (*UCW* 55). She then proceeds to use the previous day’s article as a springboard for observing the unfortunate fact that so few contemporary architects look to Newport’s ‘colonial’ models for inspiration. Along the way, she takes issue with the general misuse of the term ‘colonial,’ which she claims is widely misapplied to contemporary houses that are, in fact, ‘more like an Adam room turned inside out than like any actual house of the colonial period’ (56). She then concludes her letter with another question, one that the article to which she is responding has inspired: ‘The writer of the article in yesterday’s Daily News speaks of the admiration which we Newporters feel for our old houses. It is to be hoped that we do; but if so, why have so many been demolished, and so many ruthlessly mutilated?’ (56-7). Written and

¹ I take my cue here from Frederick Wegener, whose meticulously edited volume of Wharton’s critical writings begins with this letter.

published in 1896, Wharton's letter is, in effect, a distillation of aesthetic arguments made in *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), a book she was working on with Ogden Codman, Jr. at the time.² More to the point, the form her first piece of critical writing takes is an epistolary response—a letter provoked by another person's response to Newport's local architecture.

Her language consistently emphasizes the conversational dynamic at work in this exchange of opinions. Wharton states that yesterday's writer 'remarks that Newport is rich in houses built during the Colonial period' (*UCW* 55, italics mine). She notes that 'we *hear* continually of "Colonial" houses' (italics mine), and that 'it is easier to *talk* of a style than to study it.' Wharton's choice of words makes clear that she sees herself as entering a conversation already in progress, interjecting her own opinion in response to a host of other voices, thus her polite request at the outset in which she 'beg[s] the space' to speak. In Laplanchean terms, her letter makes explicit that the event transpires in transference (as a response to the provocation of an other) and her language reinscribes the initial centripetal vector of this event (receiving the message of an other). Finally, her critique of local architecture ends with a question that Wharton-the-critic does not answer. Rather, like Shoshana Felman's analysis of *Adieu*, Wharton's discussion achieves some degree of critical closure, which, in turn, yields a further question that she leaves open for her own readers to ponder: 'but if so; why have so many been demolished, and so many ruthlessly

² I have in mind her discussion of early American fireplaces, during which she explains that '[t]he application of the word "Colonial" to pre-revolutionary architecture and decoration has created the vague impression that there existed at that time an American architectural style. As a matter of fact, "Colonial" architecture is simply a modest copy of Georgian models' (*DH* 86).

mutilated?' (*UCW* 56-7). These formal elements—a critique that unfolds explicitly as a response to the provocation of another, conceiving of criticism as a multi-voiced conversation already in progress, and engaging an analytic process that proceeds by asking questions—characterize much of Wharton's critical writing. This early example offers a telling glimpse of such 'Copernican' tendencies, which come to the fore in certain articles ('The Criticism of Fiction') while remaining more muted in others ('Tendencies in Modern Fiction'). In line with claims set forth in the preceding chapter of this study, such tendencies can be termed 'Copernican' insofar as they all serve to underscore and reinscribe the fact that the primary vector in any interpretive act comes from the other. Interpretation is a response to the provocation of an other, according to Laplanche, and the formal elements of Wharton's criticism outlined above all serve to emphasize this 'Copernican' dynamic.

Of course, in addition to these 'Copernican' elements, Wharton's letter also contains flashes of the declarative didacticism that marks (some would say mars) a good deal of her critical output: 'eighteenth-century architecture has had no real effect upon the development of taste in America' (*UCW* 55) and 'Originality which consists in a misapplication of the materials at its command is never to be commended. The desire to do differently for the sake of doing differently is puerile' (56). Any reader of Wharton's criticism will be familiar with such sweeping pronouncements, which are scattered throughout her work, most profusely and prominently in her essays of the 1920s and 1930s. At times, her pithy lack of restraint is refreshing, if somewhat reactionary: 'the trend of the new fiction, not only in America and England, but on the continent, is chiefly

toward the amorphous and the agglutinative' (172). Then there are those sharp, opinionated barbs that show a refreshing lack of restraint: 'The "great American novel" continues to be announced every year; in good years there are generally several of them' (154). Elsewhere she sounds troublingly elitist: 'our young novelists are frequently praised for choosing the "real America" as the scene of their fiction—as though the chief intellectual and moral resources of the country lay among the poor whites of the Appalachians' (173). And, at other times, she is simply wrong: 'It is certain, at any rate, that the novel of manners or of character (and all the greatest novels belong in one or the other of these groups) must stand or fall with the degree of lifelikeness of the characters' (165). Such 'Ptolemaic' strains in her critical writings have led scholars to characterize Wharton-the-critic as 'defensive' (Tuttleton 334, 350) or as someone 'who is often either shrill, didactic or unsubstantial' (Vita-Finzi 39). And there are certainly moments when she sounds 'stodgy' and 'reflexive' (Wegener, Introduction 121).

How can one argue that such a writer is a practitioner of 'Copernican' criticism? How can critical works which strike such 'Ptolemaic' notes be considered innovative or open to the textual other? This is, after all, the woman who found Joyce's *Ulysses* a 'turgid welter of pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind)' (*Letters* 461). Wharton made this declaration in a 1923 letter to Bernard Berenson, and it is this letter, as opposed to her letter to the *Newport Daily News*, that most often comes to mind when considering Wharton-the-critic. While this dismissive declaration is often extracted from the letter to Berenson, the more complex self-probing that follows is usually ignored. 'I

know it's not because I'm getting old that I'm unresponsive.' Wharton writes, "The trouble with all this new stuff is that it's à thèse: the theory comes first, & dominates it' (461).

Taken as a whole, this letter illustrates a double movement, in which a highly emotional response—the flinging away of a book—gives way to a process of self-questioning. Why, Wharton wonders, has *Ulysses* not struck the chord in her that it has in so many others? Through this process of self-examination, addressed to an external other (Bernard Berenson), the emotional gives way to the intellectual, and she concludes that *Ulysses* is too dominated by theory, which is why she has been unable to respond to the book. She then uses this conclusion to declare that the book will not stand the test of time: 'it will go the way of "unanimisme" & all the other isms' (461). It is precisely these multiple movements, this vacillation between emotion and intellect, between 'Copernican' openness and 'Ptolemaic' closure, that characterize much of Wharton's critical writing.

Jean Laplanche locates a similar pattern of 'going astray' in Freudian thought, specifically in regard to Freud's seduction theory, which Freud abandoned in 1897 and which Laplanche has subsequently sought to rehabilitate. In 'Masochism and the General Theory of Seduction,' Laplanche outlines the procedure that he employs to effect this rehabilitation, a process that involves tracing the paths of Freud's thinking on the seduction theory. For Laplanche, such moments of 'going astray' are not reducible to 'a simple error, which it would be sufficient to refute' (197). Rather, they are far more complex and procedural in nature. Specifically, such 'Ptolemaic' lapses in Freud's work

‘concern the moment when thought, confronted by an obstacle, chooses the wrong path’ (197-8). As a result, ‘[d]emonstrating the existence of such a going-astray requires several complex elements’ such as ‘showing the possibilities of another path’ and ‘showing how the avatars of the thought one is criticizing pay homage, so to speak, to the truth which has been abandoned, with attempts—often acrobatic—to retrieve, rediscover, or reintegrate that which has been lost’ (198). Since Wharton’s critical writings often perform such ‘acrobatic’ vacillations, shifting from openness to closure and back again within a single paragraph, reading them from the perspective that Laplanche outlines is immensely productive.

Once again, I do not deny that ‘Ptolemaic’ elements exist in Wharton’s critical writings, particularly her later work. One of the most challenging, and at times frustrating, aspects of Wharton’s criticism lies in her tendency to follow innovative critical insights with declarative, reactionary assertions. Michael Nowlin has noted this dynamic at work in ‘The Vice of Reading’ where, Nowlin observes, ‘Wharton articulates what we would think of today as a kind of democratic reader-response position only to inscribe a snobbish distinction between “the mechanical reader” and “the born reader” who alone is worthy of great books’ (447). Such ‘Ptolemaic’ strains, running side-by-side with other ‘Copernican’ elements, characterize much of Wharton’s critical output. I am not suggesting that these ‘Ptolemaic’ tendencies are insignificant, nor that they ought to be ignored. Rather, I believe that perhaps they have been given undue attention, resulting in a skewed portrait of Wharton-the-critic as a short-sighted anti-modernist and nothing more.

In his article 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution,' Laplanche notes that 'one cannot say that the object of astronomy, the universe, *is* either Ptolemaic or Copernican' (82). One could make a similar claim for the universe of Edith Wharton's criticism. Admittedly, her 'Ptolemaic' declarations do, at times, end up compromising the integrity of her critical insights—as in 'The Vice of Reading,' where she makes a sophisticated claim about the contingency of meaning, stating that any meaning that can be said to arise from a literary text is intersubjective, arising from an 'intercourse between book and reader' (*UCW* 99). As a result, she argues, 'there is no abstract standard of values in literature' since 'the value of books is proportionate to what may be called their plasticity—that quality of being all things to all men, of being diversely moulded by the impact of fresh forms of thought.'³ But rather than continue exploring this notion of contingent meaning, quite radical for 1903, she launches into an odd invective against 'the mechanical reader,' abandoning an intriguing insight in favor of inveighing against the reader who 'considers it his duty to read every book that is talked about' (102).

Here, Wharton succumbs to what Laplanche identifies as the all-too-natural tendency for the human individual to lapse into centrifugal closure. As explained in the first chapter, such a 'Ptolemaic' gesture is the overriding tendency of an individual confronting an enigma that threatens her identity. In this particular case, Wharton presents a radical insight—that meaning derived

³ Given how frequently scholars emphasize her reliance on 'traditional values' and 'standards' as aesthetic criteria, that Wharton makes this declaration at all will likely prove surprising to many (Vita-Finzi 22). While she retreats from the full force of its implications, she does nonetheless claim that 'there is no abstract standard of values in literature' (qtd. above).

from a literary text is contingent upon its reader—then retreats from the full force of that assertion, declining to explore the question such an assertion begs and, instead, reversing the vector and effecting centrifugal critical closure by leaving it ‘untranslated’ (Lacanian foreclosure, in effect).⁴ Like Felman’s Balzac scholars, who are able to avoid confronting the full force of the enigmatic Stéphanie by declaring her outside the purview of critical discussion, Wharton avoids the full force of her own insight by declaring, in effect, that the insights of certain readers are invalid.

Unfortunately, the dominant tendency has been to focus far more attention on these declarative, ‘Ptolemaic’ strands, splicing and dicing them together with comments made in letters, then juxtaposing all this with her satire of modernist writers in her late novels, in order to produce a patchwork portrait of Wharton-the-critic as a reflexive antimodernist ‘haunted by the demons of modernism as they encircled her both in life and in literature’ (Howe 133).⁵ Even Frederick Wegener’s subtly argued article linking her social and political conservatism with her antimodernist tendencies devotes far more attention to the reactionary elements in Wharton’s critical writing, relegating the ‘expansive and

⁴ From a psychoanalytic point of view, one could argue that perhaps Wharton found this notion of contingent meaning deeply threatening, and thus felt compelled to retreat from it, instead of explore it. My purpose, however, is not to psychoanalyze Wharton but to amplify the correspondences between how she addresses the question of criticism and Laplanche’s theory of subjective development via interpretation in order to illustrate the radical, innovative (that is to say, ‘Copernican’) elements of Wharton’s critical writings.

⁵ This splice-and-dice approach characterizes Penelope Vita-Finzi’s *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction*, the only book-length treatment of Wharton-the-critic to date. It sets forth the claim that Wharton’s critical principles primarily involve ‘an adherence to traditional principles of order, reason, discipline, and harmony’ which spring from her over-riding ‘belief in the importance of traditional values for society and of standards in language and literature based on past forms’ (17; 22). My claim is that Wharton-the-critic was, in fact, a creature far more complex and amorphous than this characterization suggests and that a holistic approach to her critical articles reveals this complexity.

sensible position' she articulates in 'The Criticism of Fiction' to cursory acknowledgement ('Form' 127). The cumulative result of more scholarly attention being devoted to the 'Ptolemaic' strains in her work than to her innovative and more 'Copernican' impulses, however enlightening and accurate such treatments may be, has had an unfortunate effect. Since the more 'Copernican' tendencies are given, at best, cursory acknowledgement, scholarly treatments have unwittingly tended to produce a one-sided portrait of Wharton-the-critic: making her comment about *Ulysses* common knowledge among scholars, while her subtle and nuanced ideas about literary criticism, such as those set forth in 'The Criticism of Fiction,' remain largely unknown. As a result, her innovative and expansive critical gestures, claims, and rhetorical techniques—those very tendencies which I have identified in her letter to the editor of *Newport Daily News* and which characterize much of her critical writings—have remained muted at best, wholly repressed at worst.⁶

There are many instances when Wharton engages a 'Copernican' critical procedure (similar to the one the previous chapter identified in Shoshana Felman's 'Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy') without retreating into centrifugal closure. As a result, some of her critical writings follow Laplanche's 'third vicissitude' by achieving some measure of closure, while simultaneously maintaining the '*sharp goad*' of the enigma that initially solicited her. This study

⁶ Carol J. Singley's introduction to *A Historical Guide to Edith Wharton* (2003) is a recent and notable exception, perhaps a positive sign of things to come. That said, the introduction does not address Wharton's criticism, but simply the mistaken assumption that Wharton can be unproblematically labeled 'antimodernist.' Discussing this scholarly blind spot, Singley makes an observation that is long overdue: 'It is ironic that a quality lauded in an acclaimed modernist such as Eliot—concern for tradition—should have led to Wharton being considered old-fashioned or shrill, for Wharton no less than Eliot searches for stable structures of meaning amid unsettling cultural change' (9).

does not aim to examine every bit of Wharton's critical output in order to classify her definitively as a 'Copernican' or 'Ptolemaic' critic. As Frederick Wegener remarks in his introduction to *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, 'it seems in many respects an undeniable strength of Wharton's critical writings, when considered in toto, that it stubbornly defies classification' (31). I would not go so far as to claim that her 'Ptolemaic' tendencies are a strength; I would simply like to note that they exist and that the more innovative, radical, and 'Copernican' elements of her critical work have been largely overlooked. The chapters that follow aim to redress this scholarly lacuna by locating and tracing those 'Copernican' strains. Her epistolary response to the *Newport News* article on colonial houses offers a telling glimpse of these 'Copernican' elements—specifically, figuring the critical act as a response, conceiving of criticism as an on-going conversation among several parties, and pursuing critical inquiry through a predominantly interrogative procedure.

These 'Copernican' tendencies characterize much of Wharton's writing on visual art, particularly her descriptions of French cathedrals in *A Motor-Flight Through France* and her introduction to *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*. A predominantly 'Copernican' approach to critical interpretation is also deployed consistently and effectively in *The Writing of Fiction*—a sophisticated and innovative attempt to theorize the art of fiction writing, which ends up advocating and engaging a critical procedure that corresponds to Laplanche's 'third vicissitude' by achieving some measure of critical closure, while simultaneously maintaining the 'sharp goad' of the enigma that initially solicited

her thereby allowing her readers to transfer that enigma to an alternative site of inquiry.

But before turning to these longer works, I would like to trace and amplify the ‘Copernican’ strains woven throughout her shorter critical articles, specifically those pieces that address the enigma of the critical enterprise itself. Since a somewhat skewed portrait of Wharton-the-critic has resulted from a splice-and-dice approach to her work, wherein phrases are extracted from one article then juxtaposed with statements made in another article altogether and placed alongside sentences from her letters, this chapter will endeavor to take a more holistic approach to her work. By examining each article on the subject of criticism *as a whole*, and in light of Laplanche’s ideas as articulated in the previous chapter, this chapter will follow the complex vicissitudes of her arguments as they proceed, pause, close off, contradict themselves, loop back, or spiral outwards into fresh insights—whatever the case may be—in an attempt to trace and amplify the more ‘Copernican’ strains of Wharton’s critical writing. It is my hope that such an approach will serve to counter-balance the emphasis that has been given to her ‘Ptolemaic’ tendencies in order that a more nuanced vision of Wharton-the-critic—however contradictory, mercurial, brilliant, innovative, open, and narrow-minded—might emerge.

Criticism as Conversation

‘The Criticism of Fiction’ (May, 1914) is a fine example of the subtle critical insights Wharton achieves by consistently engaging a ‘Copernican’ interpretive procedure. Published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (London),

'The Criticism of Fiction' is an explicit response to an article by Henry James that appeared several months earlier (19 March). Specifically, she is responding to James's claim that '(in English-speaking countries) there is no such thing as literary criticism' (*UCW* 120). Wharton does not disagree; nor does she completely agree. Rather, she uses James's assertion as a springboard to launch a slightly different inquiry, one that starts by taking issue, gently and subtly, with certain assumptions implicit in James's article. In other words, she re-opens a question that his article begs:

Mr. James, in his first phrases, seems to suggest that, at some more privileged stage in the growth of this last-born of the arts, English fiction did actually receive critical consideration, and that its own alarming and ever-increasing bulk is, partly at least, the cause of corresponding shrinkage of the out-numbered forces of criticism. The notion is a pleasing one, and likely to receive corroboration from the 'weary reviewer' (surely a close relation of Mr. Wells's Weary Giant) who occasionally describes himself as 'refreshed by picking up' Miss Somebody-or-other's wholesome and pleasing love-story. But is this not rather a play of fancy than a statement of fact? And when, in the short history of the art of fiction, has criticism of it, except in France, attained the point of being a regular and organized process of appraisal? When, in short, has it dealt with its subject with anything like the average consecutiveness and competence that the criticism of history, of language, or of any of the exact sciences is expected to display? (121)

Here, Wharton manages the clever rhetorical feat of taking issue with James so subtly that it could easily go unnoticed.⁷ Wharton states that James's article contained the underlying assumption that at some earlier point in time 'English fiction did actually receive critical consideration' and that its proliferation places

⁷ James himself does seem to have noticed, though how much he minded remains an open question: 'I took up my *Lit. Supp.* to find you in such force over the subject you there treated on that so happy occasion that the beautiful firmness & "clarity", even if not charity, of your nerves & tone clearly gave the lie to any fear I should entertain of the effect of your annoyance. [...] Beautifully said, thought, felt, inimitably *jeté*, the paper has excited great attention & admiration here' (Powers 284).

a great burden on critics, perhaps overwhelming the forces of criticism. She then declares this a 'pleasing' notion. She does not agree with it, but claims that there is someone who does—namely, that rather unimaginative and lazy character, the 'weary reviewer.' She then takes up the short-comings of this 'notion' through a series of questions: 'But is this not rather a play of fancy than a statement of fact?' and so on.

Thus Wharton's critical gesture begins as a *response* to an assumption in James's article—an assumption that she finds slightly problematic, however much she might agree with the overall tenor of his argument (which, as she makes clear, she does). As such, her article is structured in such a way as to reinscribe the transferential dynamic that reading installs. Both the event of reading and the act of interpretation transpire in transference, and by figuring her critical article as a response, Wharton reinscribes the centripetal vector that initiates such transferential events.

In other words, James's article begs a question, which Wharton takes it upon herself to address by transferring it to her own discussion of criticism, continuing the conversation and widening the circle of participants to include other voices (such as H. G. Wells).⁸ More to the point, she transfers the question she sees lying open in James's article and responds to it with a series of her own questions ('But is this not rather a play of fancy than a statement of fact? And when, in the short history of the art of fiction, has criticism of it, except in

⁸ She refers to ideas Wells had set forth in an article titled 'The Contemporary Novel' (published in *Fortnightly Review*, 1911) several times throughout the article (UCW 128-9 Editorial FN). Thus her article is also a response to Wells, making her critical approach very much a multi-voiced conversation, as opposed to simply a dialogue between James and herself.

France, attained the point of being a regular and organized process of appraisal? When, in short, has it dealt with its subject with anything like the average consecutiveness and competence that the criticism of history, of language, or of any of the exact sciences is expected to display?). Thus, having transferred the question she sees lying open in James's article to an alternative site of inquiry, she proceeds to explore the terrain onto which it opens through a predominantly interrogative procedure.

These questions (qtd. above), in turn, provide the starting point for an inquiry that unfolds as a multi-voiced exploration of the critical enterprise. Having heard from James, Wells, and Wharton's fictional character 'the weary reviewer,' the next paragraph opens with another voice, that of 'the novelist,' who is brought in to respond to the three questions James's 'pleasing' notion has provoked Wharton to ask: 'The novelist may here intervene to say that, if it [criticism] never has, the loss is not great, or the difference appreciable.' Wharton takes issue with this attitude, declaring that 'it ought to be unnecessary to combat the strange dogma that criticism is of no service to the creative arts' (121). What follows is highly revealing:

wherever creative artists exercise their art, and have an audience to react to them, criticism will function as instinctively as any other normal appetite. [...] Criticism is as all-pervading as radium, and if every professional critic were exterminated to-morrow the process would still be active wherever any attempt to interpret life offered itself to any human attention. (121)

Wharton makes clear that she sees the critical enterprise as something that functions outside an elitist coterie of professionals. In fact, what she is

discussing is not simply criticism, but the critical faculty itself—that irrepressible human impulse to interpret.

For Wharton, the critical act is an instinct, an ‘appetite’ that consumes everything it touches, and as ‘all-pervading as radium.’ It is, she declares, an active ‘process’—one that operates independent of professional critics (‘a few salaried enemies of art,’ this phrase, of course, uttered from the point-of-view of the ‘novelist’ who has intervened and with whom Wharton is disagreeing).⁹ As a ‘process,’ interpretation is thus primarily an event, a practice, something that transpires over time, and that participates in a wider conversation that includes other voices. Like Laplanche, Wharton views the critical faculty as ineluctably bound to a situation of address. What activates the critical process, according to Wharton, is the act of addressing others. The moment ‘creative artists’ address a work of art to ‘an audience,’ the critical process is activated: ‘the process would still be active wherever any attempt to interpret life *offered itself* to any human attention’ (121, italics mine).¹⁰ Or, in Laplanche’s words, ‘*It is the offer which creates the demand*: a constant proposition in the cultural domain’ (‘Transference’ 225).

⁹ Here Wharton seems to contradict herself, since the previous few paragraphs are devoted to praising French critics for being more professional. However, close attention to her argument reveals that she is actually praising French critics for employing a more effective critical procedure, not for being more knowledgeable and bringing this elevated knowledge, or superior code-breaking ability, to bear on literature: ‘There is not a hack reviewer on a daily paper in France who does not, as it were, know by which handle to pick up his subject’ (UCW 121). Wharton’s reason for her belief that French literary discourse is superior to Anglo-Saxon critical discussions is also revealing: ‘The French intelligence, moreover, perpetually *exercises itself in conversation upon questions* of literary interest’ (120; italics mine). She believes French critics employ a more precise and refined critical procedure when approaching their subjects, not that they are more learned or possess superior criteria that they universally apply.

¹⁰ Wharton’s conception of the work of art as, itself, an act of interpretation (‘any attempt to interpret life’) is highly significant and will be discussed further in chapters three and four.

Wharton does not, however, believe that simply because offering artwork to the public activates the critical faculty, *any* critical response is valid or salutary—quite the opposite. She argues that since the critical faculty will operate, inevitably, the moment art is addressed to an audience, artists ought not only to accept this fact, but embrace it, because when a work of art undergoes a constructive critical procedure, criticism aids the artist. Like Laplanche, Wharton believes that some critical procedures are more constructive than others. This being so, she argues that critics ought to refine their natural critical instinct, just as human beings channel and refine other ‘normal appetite[s]’:

The ascidian ‘criticizes’ the irritation to which it reacts, but its rudimentary contractions are not varied by the nature of the irritating agent. And it is hardly too much to say that English-speaking criticism is in the ascidian stage, and throws out or retracts its blind feelers with the same indiscrimination of movement. This, however, is not an argument for suppressing criticism, but only for finding reasons why, since it inevitably does throw its feelers out, it should be helped to develop them into finer instruments of precision.

The chief reason is that it will help the novelists themselves. [...] And to whom can such a demand be addressed than to the professional critic? (121)

Unlike the ascidian whose ‘rudimentary contractions are not varied by the nature of the irritating agent,’ critics ought to vary their reactions to novels in response to the particular novel on which their critical faculty is being brought to bear.

How? By asking questions:

What, then, has criticism to say to the modern novelist? First, it has to find out what to ask of him. [...] ¹¹ Let the critic, then, first seek to find out what particular thing each particular novel is trying to be. [...]

¹¹ I have omitted the following, which is not directly relevant to my claim, but which is important to note in the face of all the accusations leveled at Wharton’s approach to the literary innovations of her day being predominantly ‘traditional’ and largely prescriptive: ‘Mr. Wells makes a brilliant plea for the greatest possible laxity in the interpretation of the term ‘novel’; and certainly nothing

There would seem to be but two primary questions to ask in estimating any work of art: What has the author tried to represent, and how far has he succeeded?—and a third, which is dependent on them: Was the subject chosen worth representing—has it the quality of being what Balzac called ‘vrai dans l’art’? These three inquiries, if duly pressed, yield a full answer to the aesthetic problem of the novel. (125-127)¹²

If the novel presents an ‘aesthetic problem,’ criticism involves an epistemological one, since a critic’s primary task is, according to Wharton, ‘find[ing] out what particular thing each particular novel is trying to be.’ Criticism does not involve applying a body of knowledge (theory) to an object of study (literature). Nor does it entail invoking a check-list of abstract standards, imported from without, and measuring the novel against these standards: ‘any criticism whatever implies references to a collective standard. The greater the critic, the fewer these references need to be’ (125). In other words, the ‘great’ critic is the one who ceases to rely on outside sources to legitimize his critique. Such a critic does not feel the need invoke references to a presumed ‘collective standard,’ because the work of art itself is setting the standard.

Time and again in her critical writings, Wharton argues against criticism that is ‘ready-made and applied from the outside (161). In ‘A Cycle of Reviewing,’ she asserts that ‘the only rules to be considered in art evolve from

could be stupider than to apply hard and fast measures to so wonderfully elastic a form. A sonnet it a sonnet, but a novel may be almost anything’ (125). This statement runs directly counter to claims such as the one made by Irving Howe that ‘for Mrs. Wharton, the novel is essentially a fixed form’ (123) or by James Tuttleton, who finds ‘a rigidity in her conception of the novel that the critic must, finally, deplore’ (348).

¹² By phrasing her second series of questions in terms of the author (‘What was the author trying to represent and how far has he succeeded?’), she might seem to be committing the intentional fallacy, but, as my chapter on *The Writing of Fiction* makes clear, Wharton sees a text as existing apart from its author. Her choice of phrasing here is unfortunate, since she makes the separation between author and text very clear in *The Writing of Fiction*. I would enjoin readers to focus on her first phrasing, which stresses the agency of the text itself (‘what particular thing each particular novel is trying to be’), as more indicative of her actual position, which is that the text has an ontological status of its own, independent of the author’s mind and intent. See chapter four.

the inside' (*UCW* 161). The opening sentence of *The Decoration of Houses* makes a similar claim: 'Rooms may be decorated in two ways: by superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure, or by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out' (1). Likewise, reviewing Herbert W. Paul's biography of Matthew Arnold, Wharton takes Paul sharply to task for his 'axiomatic flippancies' and 'cheerful dogmatism' (*UCW* 94-5). Her technique for criticizing Herbert Paul's depreciation of Arnold's poetry is illustrative. Rather than argue with his dogmatic standards or quibble with his terminology by offering up her own dueling axioms and arguing for their superiority, she merely offers Arnold's lines alongside Paul's fussy quibbles, allowing Arnold's own lyrics to reveal the folly of Paul's 'ready-made' criticism. Such techniques show that Wharton trusts her readers a great deal, having faith that she need only present them with lines from Arnold's poems, and they will grasp the absurdity of Paul's stodgy axioms and his dismissive judgments.¹³ But, more to the point, Wharton's main argument with Paul is the fact that he brings 'ready-made' axioms to bear on

¹³ Wharton is rarely given credit for having a democratic spirit, but, in point of fact, she often places a good deal of trust in her readers ('The Vice of Reading' aside, of course). It's critics whom she most vociferously and consistently deplores, and, often as not, one of the reasons she does so involves their condescension to readers. In 'The Great American Novel,' she states that 'one of the chief weaknesses of modern reviewing' is 'the idea that the reader wants only a certain "line of goods" and must have it' (*UCW* 162). Her "Memories of Paul Bourget Overseas" is also enlightening on this score. Chronicling their forty-three year friendship, Wharton states that their main source of disagreement arose from their divergent attitudes towards their readers: 'Bourget would always chide me because in my books I did not sufficiently explain my characters; I replied that he underestimated the intelligence of his readers' (*UCW* 224). Time and again, she takes issue with the way critics effectively legislate culture to the detriment of readers and writers alike, which is hardly an 'antidemocratic' stance. This 'antidemocratic' strain in her work has been amplified while these other, far more democratic tendencies that are woven throughout her critical writings, tend to be ignored. For instance, Frederick Wegener finds 'a wider antiliberal, indeed, antidemocratic, critique' in Wharton's antimodernist writings, while neglecting the degree to which her advocacy for individual readers against critics who try to legislate culture is, in fact, quite democratic in spirit ('Form' 133).

Arnold's verse and applies them without any thought as to whether such axioms are appropriate to this particular form of poetry: 'It is indeed hard to say whether he [Paul] is more felicitous in the framing of general rules or in their special application' (*UCW* 95). All of which begs the question: does Wharton follow her own advice? Does she follow the procedure she advocates in 'The Criticism of Fiction' when reviewing fiction herself?

Unfortunately, Wharton only reviewed two books of fiction throughout her entire career.¹⁴ Nonetheless, however scant the evidence, it ought to be examined. In her review of Howard Sturgis's *Belchamber* (1905), she is quite explicit about her methodology: 'But if the sincere critic's first business is to accept the author's postulate, and if Mr. Sturgis has chosen to hamper himself with a 'difficult' subject, the question in point is to find out how he has dealt with it' (*UCW* 107). In fact, this review carefully addresses each of the three questions listed in 'The Criticism of Fiction'—namely, 'What has the author tried to represent, and how far has he succeeded?' and 'Was the subject chosen worth representing—has it the quality of being what Balzac called 'vrai dans l'art?' (*UCW* 126-7). In her review of *Belchamber*, Wharton finds that Sturgis's novel is trying to be a 'tragedy of the trivial' (109). It is a novel that depicts 'how the susceptibilities of a tender and serious spirit, hampered by physical infirmity, may be crushed and trampled under foot in the mad race for luxury

¹⁴ Wharton's review work is disappointingly small, and most of it was done early in her career. In all, she wrote three drama reviews ('Stephen Phillips's *Ulysses*,' 'The Theatres' and 'The Three Francescas' all written in 1902); reviewed two biographies (Leslie Stephens's *George Eliot* (1902) and Herbert W. Paul's *Matthew Arnold* (1903) and two books devoted to visual art (Edwin and Evangeline Blashfields' *Italian Cities* (1901) and Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914), along with her review of Percy Lubbock's *The Letters of Henry James* (1920), which is more a tribute to her late friend than a review of Lubbock's volume.

and amusement' (109-10). She does find in it Balzac's 'vrai dans l'art' or, as she phrases it here, 'the quality of the "thing in itself" (107). Although there are some 'faults of construction and perspective,' overall the novel succeeds because it has 'the quality of the "thing in itself"; with something of the desultoriness, the irregularity of life caught in the act, and pressed still throbbing between the leaves of the book' (107). She also believes the subject is worth representing, because, as opposed to being simply a book about 'the adventures of idle and fashionable people,' *Belchamber* is edifying insofar as it shows how 'a handful of vulgar people' can end up becoming 'an engine of destruction through the illusions they kill and the generous ardors they turn to despair' (110).¹⁵

In addition to engaging an analytic process that proceeds by asking questions, Wharton figures her review of *Belchamber* as an intervention into a conversation already in progress: 'Some may say that, in his desire to present life as it is, he has chosen what Balzac called "a situation true in life but not in art:" that is, unfitted to the restrictions and conventions of the novelist's craft' (197).¹⁶ She follows this with an imagined monologue from the author himself, wherein he offers his thought process in offering this book to the public.

Wharton proceeds to take this fanciful statement of intent as a springboard for her analysis of the book, using these precepts as a means by which to assess the work.

¹⁵ The thematic correspondence with her own *House of Mirth* is clear and no doubt this made Wharton more favorably disposed to such a book. Millicent Bell has noted as much (104), as has Geoffrey Walton (169). In addition, of course, Howard Sturgis was a close friend of Edith Wharton's.

¹⁶ This 'some' is quite clearly Henry James, who made no secret of his dislike of the novel. See *A Backward Glance* pp. 234-5. In particular, James apparently pronounced Sturgis's book too 'Thackerayan,' a charge Wharton addresses in the opening paragraphs of her review: 'if his first pages are reminiscent of Thackeray, that is merely a literary echo' (*UCW* 106).

A crucial point to keep in mind is that giving the author, Howard Sturgis, a voice is a rhetorical device, which allows her analysis to proceed as a response to the question she believes critics ought to pose when reviewing a novel—namely, what is this particular novel trying to be? Wharton is not claiming to know definitively the author's intent. By giving the author a voice, Wharton is able to figure her review as a response to this particular novel, *Belchamber*, which is precisely the sort of criticism she advocates in 'The Criticism of Fiction.' In fact, this fanciful authorial rumination that Wharton-the-critic ascribes to the novelist is the intent she has ferreted out of the work itself—a crucial distinction and one she addresses at length in *The Writing of Fiction*.¹⁷ For now, my main point is the following: in her review of Sturgis's novel, her critical analysis unfolds through a predominantly interrogative procedure that attempts to approach and listen to what particular thing the novel in question is trying to be and then assess whether this aim has been met, and whether that aim was worthwhile or not. Wharton figures her critique as a conversation with multiple participants: the 'some' who believe this subject is unfit for a novel, the imagined voice of the author, who is allowed to defend himself, and the voice of Wharton-the-critic, who tries to judge whether the

¹⁷ It would be easy to level accusations at Wharton for subscribing to a kind of intentional fallacy, but when placed in context with all her critical opinions, particularly those set forth in *The Writing of Fiction*, it is clear that she draws a sharp distinction between textual intent and authorial intent—preferring always to judge a book on the basis of the former. In her review of *Belchamber*, she states outright that one of its greatest strengths is the text's ability to act independently of its author's intent, since 'all its characters appear to do, not what the author has planned for them, but what is true to their natures' (UCW 109). Likewise, in her review of Maurice Hewlett's *The Fool Errant* (1905), Wharton criticizes the novel for not breaking away enough from the author's own intent: "If Virginia must be quiet and reserved for, say, a dozen pages, then, by the god of noise, she shall make up for it on the thirteenth. And make up for it she does. Mr. Hewlett is there to see that she gets her opportunity. [...] When two persons so divergent speak in the same tone, one suspects the voice is Mr. Hewlett's' (UCW 111-3). For a detailed discussion of Wharton's distinction between textual and authorial intent, see chapter four.

novel she is reviewing succeeds in being the particular thing it is trying to be and whether such a thing is worth representing in the first place. In short, her approach is entirely consistent with the interpretive procedure she advocates in 'The Criticism of Fiction.'

Wharton's only other fiction review was written the same year as her review of *Belchamber* (1905). This review addresses Maurice Hewlett's *The Fool Errant*, an historical novel set in the same time and place (eighteenth century Italy) as her own novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902), which had been published three years earlier. Her review of Hewlett's novel is less explicit about its methodology than her review of *Belchamber*, but it does roughly follow the procedure she advocates in 'The Criticism of Fiction.' Wharton makes immediately clear that Hewlett's novel will be evaluated according to the particular thing that it is trying to be—namely, an historical novel set in the eighteenth century, which also aims for psychological realism in its characters. As such, Wharton's critique addresses how well the novel succeeds in fulfilling the demands of historical fiction and in drawing psychologically viable and lively characters. Since historical fiction is 'obliged to give [his] readers a picture of the times as well as of the characters of the story,' she devotes a good deal of energy to whether Hewlett has adequately and accurately rendered eighteenth century Italy. Her conclusion is mixed, but the form her criticisms take is revealing:

Even here—out of pure pedantry—one might open a parenthesis to ask if, at that period, the Paternity were still heard of, if the art-loving traveler, as he approached Florence, thought first of seeing Brunelleschi's dome and Giotto's tower, and if the *cognoscenti* discussed the technique of Fra Angelico and Mantegna? (113)

By her own admission, such a quibble might be a bit pedantic, but the way it is delivered, in the form of a question, is consistent with the overall tone of her review, which is generous and warmly receptive to Hewlett's project. Of Hewlett's 'villainous Capuchin friar' whom Wharton praises as 'one of the most effectively drawn figures in the book,' she delivers a similarly gentle critique that questions how well suited he is to the *sotte voce* manners of eighteenth century society: 'Fra Palamone is admirably truculent; but does he not even antedate Boccaccio?' (112). To whom are these questions addressed? They seem far too pointed and precise to be simply addressed to potential readers of Hewlett's novel. What purpose is such sharp, perhaps even, as she herself admits, pedantic precision meant to serve? Or, more accurately, whom is it meant to serve? The author himself, it would seem. As she argues in 'The Criticism of Fiction,' employing more 'precision' in employing the critical faculty 'will help novelists themselves' (121). In fact, Wharton's razor-sharp observations on *The Fool Errant* have the very distinct feel of one writer addressing another, and, as such, they serve a dual purpose. These questions serve to illustrate some of the ways in which the book falls slightly short of the mark for which it aims (historical fiction with psychologically viable characters) in order that readers can decide if they want to read it, while simultaneously trying to help the author see where he has missed the mark his book attempts to hit. In other words, her review is addressed to the author as well as to potential readers.

Thus Wharton's review of Hewlett's *The Fool Errant* and her review of Howard Sturgis's *Belchamber* attempt to practice the critical procedure that 'The Criticism of Fiction' advocates. This critical procedure approaches a literary text not as a stable object of study, but as a subject with which the critic must actively engage in order to try to know 'what particular thing each particular book is trying to be.'¹⁸ In other words, the critic's central task is to attempt a process of cognition, to try and come to *know* the enigma that confronts him by asking questions, then to hone his critical response according to what the text itself tells him. As she explains in 'The Criticism of Fiction': 'It is, at any rate, the novelist who may at present be heard calling in the wilderness for the absent critic to *approach*, and *listen*, and understand' (*UCW* 122; italics mine) The critic must, first and foremost, pay attention to the 'particular novel' that addresses him, remaining open in Laplanche's sense of the word, that is to say, 'being available to the other who comes to surprise me' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 47). More specifically, Wharton wants critics to pay attention to 'the light it [a novel] casts on questions beyond its borders' since she believes that 'the greatness of the novel may perhaps be measured by the width of this luminous zone' (*UCW* 127).

In other words, 'The Criticism of Fiction' calls for an approach to textual interpretation that is propelled not by a desire for hermeneutic closure—what does this novel mean? what must it designate?—but that asks what this novel indicates or strains toward? What light does it cast on 'questions beyond its

¹⁸ Wharton's declaration that '[t]hese are the first principles the critic should learn' makes clear that she conceives critical principles as consisting of the interrogative *procedure* she has just painstakingly outlined, as opposed to a pre-established code or set of axioms (127).

borders?' Wharton demands that critics engage with the enigma(s) in a literary text, with that question, or set of questions, for which even the text itself is not to have an answer. She does not want critics to answer this question (or set of questions), but to have the acumen to hear that it is being asked and to locate and explore the terrain ('luminous zone') onto which it opens.

Wharton believes that only this sort of criticism will aid authors themselves, and she believes critics have a great deal to teach novelists. As has been previously noted, she argues for more 'precision' in employing the critical faculty because 'it will help novelists themselves' (*UCW* 121). Her review of Hewlett's *The Fool Errant* goes to great lengths to place this novel in context with what the author has done before, and, as has been previously noted, her extremely precise criticisms, delivered as questions addressed to the book's author and its readers, seem focused on helping Hewlett do better next time. This conviction, expressed in 'The Criticism of Fiction' and practiced in her own fiction reviews, that critics can help writers write better novels gets repeated in 'A Cycle of Reviewing' (1928), where she insists 'I am convinced that the reviewer should be as helpful to the author as to the reader' (*UCW* 160). If critics were to respond to novels by attending to the particular thing each book is trying to be, Wharton argues, 'they would render services greater than they guess to the writer who thirsts to know how much of the inward vision he has succeeded in making visible to others' (*UCW* 162).

Such an assertion is far from disingenuous. Wharton herself learned a great deal from reviews of her own work, and these lessons were often incorporated in her next book, as a 1904 letter to W. C. Brownell attests: 'when

the critics have found fault with me I have usually abounded in their sense, & seen, as I thought, a way of doing better the next time' (*Letters* 91). Tellingly, in 'The Criticism of Fiction' she poses the question, 'What, then, has criticism to say to the modern novelist? First, it has to find out what to ask of him.' (*UCW* 125; italics mine). Ideally, Wharton would like critics to *ask* something of writers, who will then offer their texts as a response to this question. Critics would then judge a book *as a unique individual* on its own terms and respond with critical treatments that help the writer continue the conversation by writing an even better novel next time. Thus critics and writers ought to be engaged in an endless dialogue, a kind of epistolary exchange or correspondence, with each responding to the other.

All of which circles back to where this discussion began: with the observation that Wharton's 'The Criticism of Fiction' is an explicit response to an article by Henry James that had appeared in the same publication (*Times Literary Supplement*) several months before. Indeed, one could read 'The Criticism of Fiction' as part of the epistolary correspondence between James and Wharton, a letter addressed to James as well as to the wider public. As such, it reinscribes the transferential dynamic Laplanche identifies as being characteristic of the 'poetic situation':

The problem of the addressee, of the anonymous addressee, is an essential part of any poetic situation. The addressee is essentially enigmatic, even if he sometimes takes on individual traits. So it is with Van Gogh's Theo, who is as much an analyst as Fleiss is for Freud, for behind him looms the nameless crowd, addressees of the message in a bottle. (Laplanche, "Transference" 224)

Here Laplanche is alluding to the letters Van Gogh wrote to his brother, Theo, from which many of his opinions about art have since been extracted (much as Wharton thinks we ought to extract Henry James's principles from his letters), and the letters Freud wrote to Fleiss, from which Laplanche traces and re-valorizes Freud's abandoned theory of seduction.¹⁹ Laplanche's point is that although these letters are addressed to particular individuals (Theo, Fleiss), these addresses are really a stand-in for what is an essentially enigmatic position—that of the anonymous addressee. According to Laplanche, Theo van Gogh and Fleiss occupy the symbolic position of addressee, a position that is always and ineluctably enigmatic, for behind them 'looms the nameless crowd.'

The point is a crucial one when discussing Wharton's 'The Criticism of Fiction' as a response to Henry James. By emphasizing that the article is a response to Henry James, one risks placing Wharton, yet again, under James's shadow, reducing her critical work to mere reactions to the ideas of her *cher maître*, who is setting the terms of the debate. Geoffrey Walton reads the 'The Criticism of Fiction' in these terms, denying Wharton any critical identity distinct from Henry James (Walton 169-70). Likewise, Millicent Bell reads Wharton's essay solely in terms of Henry James and sees 'The Criticism of Fiction' as an unquestioning endorsement of what James had written earlier (Bell 289).

Laplanche's theory of the subject, however, forces a reconsideration and re-valorization of how we conceive the act of responding. A response is not a

¹⁹ See Laplanche's 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution' in John Fletcher, Ed. *Essays on Otherness*, London: Routledge, 1999: 52-83.

lesser act. It is, according to Laplanche, the only act possible. From the moment human beings are born, they must respond to the actions of others, their adult care-takers. How we respond, for Laplanche, is at the heart of what makes us individuals. It is what shapes the unconscious and confers individuality. As adults, it is only through responding in a certain way to the provocation of enigmatic messages, via what he calls this 'third vicissitude' (a response that resists foreclosure and total repression), that we can achieve any degree of knowledge or cognition, that human individuals can, in other words, develop, change, or grow.

To criticize Wharton for figuring 'The Criticism of Fiction' as a response to James and to assume that this lessens her value as a critic is to misunderstand the nature of criticism. Criticism, like reading, is always a response. It is a response to the provocation of a literary text or, perhaps, to another 'theoretical' text or to another set of ideas (as in the case of Wharton responding to James). James's own views are, necessarily, a response as well—a response to novels he has read and written. His deductions are responses to a lifetime's experience of reading and writing novels and to others' views, such as those of Howells. Thus, viewed in light of Laplanche's theory of the subject, Wharton's criticism-as-response is not a lesser form of criticism. It is, in fact, a form of criticism that avoids hypocrisy insofar as it accepts and embraces what criticism must, by necessity, always be—a response to the provocation of an other. Sometimes that 'other' is the work of art itself, at other times it is another critic, or perhaps the ideas of a friend, who is also a writer and critic and, as in this particular case of Wharton responding to James.

Wharton sees the critical faculty operating in this way, as a response, and she wants this responsive action to be refined so that it can operate with greater 'precision' (*UCW* 121). In 'The Criticism of Fiction,' she calls for the critical faculty to operate responsively, as opposed to reactively. She wants questions of literature and aesthetics to be explored in one long impassioned, engaging conversation between critics and authors, in which each listens and responds to the other; and she feels critics are failing to hold up their end of the exchange: 'the novelist, of late, has been challenging his reviewer to the consideration of new theories of novel-writing. The reviewer should be ready and eager to examine and understand these theories' (*UCW* 127). And it is on this point, the question of modernist writing, that her article ends.²⁰

But before discussing this final critical turn, I would like to re-trace the various revolutions her analysis takes in 'The Criticism of Fiction.' The article opens as a response to Henry James's piece, which was published several months before in the same journal. Wharton's response takes as its subject a question that James's article begs—a question Wharton explores through an interrogative procedure that proceeds by posing a series of subsequent questions to which her article then responds. These responses produce some measure of critical closure: a specific process by which critics can analyze and evaluate literary texts. This analytic procedure involves trying 'to find out what particular thing each particular book is trying to be' by asking questions (what has the text tried to represent? Is it successful? Is it something worth

²⁰ The degree to which Wharton herself follows her own advice, particularly when addressing modernist writing herself, is a question that will be pursued when her articles of 1920s and 1930s are discussed.

representing?) (125). Having achieved a measure of critical closure in proposing this procedure, Wharton's discussion then undergoes a further turn, or revolution. She highlights what she sees as the greatest challenge facing critics in May, 1914—namely, the question of modernist writing. Before issuing this challenge to her readers, Wharton articulates the question that critics approaching these 'new' novels ought to ask:

It may well be that some new theory of form, as adequate to its new purpose as those preceding it, will be evolved from the present welter of experiment; but to imagine that form can ever be dispensed with is like saying that wine can be drunk without something to drink it from. The boundless gush of 'life,' to be tasted and savored, must be caught in some outstretched vessel of perception; and to perceive is to limit and to choose. The novelist may plead as much as he pleases for the formless novel, the unemphasized notation of a certain stretch of a certain runnel of the stream of things; *but why has he chosen that particular stretch of that particular runnel?* [...] the instant one has set down certain things one has created a reason for setting down certain others, and *the pattern begins to show* (124-5).

Here, Wharton makes it quite clear that she is open to the idea that modernist writing might have happened upon 'some new theory of form,' and she would like critics to ascertain what that theory might be. How? By asking the following question, which Wharton thinks modernist writing begs: 'why has he [author] chosen that particular stretch of that particular runnel?' What she rejects is the claim by writers themselves that their work is completely without form (125). Critics ought to try to see this 'pattern,' of which writers themselves are unaware, and point it out. Such a service, Wharton believes, would be invaluable to 'the new novelist' since 'everything in this grimy noisy rough-and-tumble outer world is so new and of such amazing interest that he is solicited

with equal urgency by facts and instances that are not always of equal value' (127).

It is this question, the one modernist writing seems to beg, that Wharton opens for her own readers, so that they might transfer it to an alternative site of inquiry and explore it further. Thus 'The Criticism of Fiction' follows Laplanche's 'third vicissitude' by achieving some measure of critical closure, while simultaneously maintaining the '*sharp goad*' of an enigma (what 'pattern' or 'new theory of form' can be discerned in modernist writings?). Is this article an example of Wharton employing a 'Copernican' interpretive procedure without lapsing into even the slightest bit of centrifugal closure? Does she leave the question of modernist writing completely open, or does she retreat from it? Does her analysis in 'The Criticism of Fiction' resist the sorts of 'Ptolemaic' lapse that so severely compromises 'The Vice of Reading'? Not quite. But she comes extremely close, and the lapse is a mild one, compared with her strange invective against the 'mechanical reader' that undermines her insights about contingency of meaning in 'The Vice of Reading.' In the final paragraph of 'The Criticism of Fiction,' having sustained and advocated a 'Copernican' interpretive procedure for eight pages, her analysis slips ever so briefly from the interrogative to the declarative:

It is the critic's affair to deal discriminatingly with these new facts [modernist writing], to point out and insist upon the superior permanence and beauty of the subject deeply pondered, discerned, and released from encumbering trivialities, and to show that vague bulk may produce less impression of weight and solidity than firmly outlined form (128).

Here, Wharton instructs instead of inquires, preaches instead of ponders. But it is a minor slip, isolated and brief, and it does not undermine the subtle, nuanced and ‘Copernican’ treatment of the question of criticism that has come before.²¹

Does it close off the question of modernist writing which she has, right up until this moment, managed to leave open? To a degree, yes, insofar as she lapses into telling critics what conclusions they ought to draw, as opposed to setting forth a procedure that will best aid them in trying to know ‘what particular thing each book is trying to be.’ But, for Wharton herself, the question of modernist writing seems not to have been resolved, for she takes it up again herself twenty years later. But before addressing Wharton’s treatment of modernism in 1934, I would like to explore how she treated the question of criticism in the intervening twenty years.

²¹ Interestingly, in *Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle*, Susan Goodman connects the closing passage of *The Criticism of Fiction* with Bernard Berenson’s work, claiming that Wharton ‘ends the essay by applying Berenson’s definition of the connoisseur to her own of a critic’ (95). Not only does such an observation correspond with my contention that Wharton conceived criticism, when operating as its best, as a conversation among several parties, it also begs a further question: to what degree do the declarative tendencies in Wharton’s criticism spring from her interactions with male counter-parts and critics? In his introduction to *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, Frederick Wegener convincingly argues that Wharton saw criticism as a predominantly male activity (6-16). To what degree does Wharton adopt the postures and rhetorical gestures of the male critics in her circle, because she assumes that this is what a critic ought to do and be? It is worth noting that the most declarative moment of this essay can be traced to Wharton’s interactions with another critic and that this critic was a male friend whose critical ability Wharton greatly admired. An attempt to explore this question—which critical tendencies can be traced to her friends and which tendencies seem to be, more or less, organic to Wharton herself, and whether this is a result of the gendered view Wharton took of critical activity—might prove fertile ground for further study.

Epistolary Criticism

It is not until 1920 that Edith Wharton returns to the question of literary criticism.²² She does so in a review of Percy Lubbock's selected letters of Henry James. Her review is many things, primarily a tribute to the rich wit and warm heartedness of her dear friend, Henry James, who had died four years before in 1916. But it is also revealing in light of the opinions she expressed six years earlier in 'The Criticism of Fiction'—specifically, her desire for criticism to unfold as a kind of conversation between writers and critics. Her article for the *Quarterly Review*, 'Henry James in His Letters' (1920), could have focused on any number of subjects. Wharton's choice is illustrative: 'These pages are not concerned with the ultimate results of his art, but only with *a summary of its principles as set forth in his letters*' (UCW 149; italics mine). It is here, in his correspondence and not in his prefaces, that Wharton claims one can find 'a clearer and more accessible, if less deeply reasoned, compendium of his theory' (149). In fact, she finds the prefaces 'the work of an ill and weary man' and feels that although they 'deal exhaustively with subject and construction [...] they do so with scattered magnificence' (148). For this reason, she urges readers to look

²² In June, 1914, she wrote a review of Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism*, but because the focus of this piece is the visual arts, in the interests of space, I have omitted a full treatment of the piece. Suffice it to say, the review follows the interpretive procedure that she outlines in 'The Criticism of Fiction' insofar as she takes the book on its own terms. The opening sentence of the review declares that the intent of Scott's book 'has been to treat of architecture in its twofold aspect, as a purely plastic problem and as an appeal to imaginative associations, and also to show to what extent there is a traceable relation between these aspects' (UCW 130). Her review then proceeds to assess the book on these terms and address the question of whether such a treatment is relevant and worthwhile insofar as she sees it performing a function in contemporary art criticism that other books do not and provides a fresh outlook (133). Clearly she published no criticism between June, 1915 and July, 1920 due to the war, during which time she devoted a tremendous amount of energy to relief efforts and refugee hospitals. See Alan Price's *The End of the Age of Innocence* for a detailed account of her war work and Julie Olin-Ammentorp's *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* for an examination of the war's impact on her writing.

to his correspondence, and for Wharton, his correspondence is valuable insofar as it gives a glimpse, however pale, of his conversation: ‘Some one said of the “Letters” that “one heard him talk in them”; but though they speak with his voice they do not approach the best that he could say’ (139). Wharton goes to great descriptive lengths to evoke the shape and ring of James’s talk, trying to give her readers a feel for what it was like to be carried along by ‘the great swirls and floods of his talk’ (130). She then turns to the task of highlighting passages from the letters in which James articulates his theories of fiction (139).²³ In other words, Wharton’s review approaches James’s correspondence as an evocation of his conversation (however pale), and she believes that it is through his correspondence (written conversation) that his critical principles are best revealed.

The point is not whether Wharton was ‘right’ about James or about the quality of his prefaces versus his letters. The point is the way she chooses to approach his letters. She sees great critical value in them, for it is here, in his correspondence—a correspondence that she views as a reflection, however ghostly and inadequate, of his talk—that she believes his theories are revealed most completely. Interestingly, she sees James’s ‘theory of composition’ emerging throughout the letters in response to the thoughts and work of others. In letters to Howells, to Stevenson, to Wells, and to his brother, William, James ‘continually stated and restated his theory of composition’ (144). Thus, for Wharton, James’s own principles were developed and refined through

²³ Much of this is repeated word for word in her chapter on Henry James in *A Backward Glance*.

correspondence with fellow writers and readers, friends and family (primarily his brother, William).

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton describes many of her conversations with Henry James, and the form these exchanges often take is significant. Their discussion about James's *The Golden Bowl* illustrates just the sort of dynamic Wharton advocates and practices in her own critical writings. Reading *The Golden Bowl* provokes a series of questions in Wharton, questions she subsequently addresses to James himself:

‘What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters in ‘The Golden Bowl’ in the void? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other, and fencing with each other? Why have you stripped them of all the *human fringes* we necessarily trail after us through life?’ (191)

James's reply, delivered in a ‘disturbed voice’—‘My dear, I did not know I had!’—makes Wharton wish she had not spoken, for ‘I saw that my *question*, instead of *starting one of our absorbing literary discussions*, had only turned his startled attention on a peculiarity of which he had been completely unconscious’ (191; italics mine). Wharton has read James's most recent novel, and it has provoked a series of questions—questions she (mistakenly, as it happens) then poses to Henry James in the hopes of touching off a critical discussion. Presumably, she desires the sort of discussion described in her chapter on Qu'Acre, a conversation triggered by ‘the question: “And Meredith—?”’ in which ‘the sacred question of craft was touched upon’ and explored at length among her circle of friends (232-3).

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton devotes a great deal of time and attention to recalling her conversations with James about art and literature. Wharton extols and longs for such conversations, which illustrates how valuable such exchanges were to her.²⁴ These correspondences between her life and her critical principles serve to reinforce the importance Wharton places on the physical event of conversation—talk in which the exchange of ideas transpires among multiple parties, exchanges often sparked by posing questions that books have inspired. Much of the frustration that one senses in Wharton’s critical articles is frustration with critics, whom she sees as failing to hold up their end of the conversation.

Fourteen years after ‘The Criticism of Fiction,’ she expresses this frustration once again in an article that takes criticism as its subject. In ‘A Cycle of Reviewing’ (1928), she chides critics for setting forth the notion that ‘certain categories of human beings are of less intrinsic interest than others’ and urges them to instead ‘try to divine and formulate principles stirring’ in the works they have chosen to review. If critics were to respond to novels in such a way, Wharton argues, ‘they would render services greater than they guess to the writer who thirsts to know how much of the inward vision he has succeeded in making visible to others’ (162). In short, from Wharton’s point of view, the impassioned and engaging conversation between critics and authors that she would like to see fails to materialize in the journals and newspapers of her day.

²⁴ For more on the interactions between Edith Wharton and her friends and the impact these conversations had on Wharton’s work, see Susan Goodman’s *Edith Wharton’s Inner Circle*.

Such a conversation does, however, transpire within the pages of one of her own novels.

Hudson River Bracketed (1929), which tends towards an all-too explicit summary of Wharton's views on literature and criticism, is revealing in this respect. Specifically, the relationship between Vance Weston, Wharton's author-hero, and his grudging mentor, 'the great critic' George Frenside, dramatizes just the sort of conversation between novelists and critics that her critical articles advocate (*HRB* 122). As Frederick Wegener has pointed out, George Frenside 'serves not only as the literary conscience of the novel but also as the character through whom Wharton principally expresses her own critical convictions' (15). As such, Frenside's response to the young novelist is illuminating when placed in context with Wharton's conviction that criticism ought to say something to contemporary authors to help them write better novels.

At the point in *Hudson River Bracketed* when this conversation transpires, Vance Weston finds himself confused and lost. His first novel, *Instead*, has proven a critical and commercial success, but the subsequent chatter that the book inspires turns his work into 'a perplexity' and causes him to doubt his creative ability (*HRB* 374): 'his first encounter with the perplexing contradictory theories of different literary groups to which the success of his book introduced him, all the wild currents and whirlpools of critical opinion in New York, had shaken his faith in himself' (374). Vance feels that he needs 'Somebody who'll listen to me anyhow' and decides that somebody is George Frenside (374). Wharton shows Frenside, 'the great critic' (122), not only as

someone who will listen and understand, but also as one who responds constructively, and the form his response takes is revealing: 'He [Frenside] did not harangue him, but *put a series of questions* and helped Vance to answer them, so that even when Frenside was talking Vance seemed to be listening to himself' (376; italics mine). Frenside then offers Vance his opinion of his most recent novel: 'well, it's a pretty thing, exquisite, in fact, and a surprise, a novelty as its popularity has proved. But it's a thing that leads nowhere. An evocation—an emanation—something you wrought with enchantments, eh?' (377).

Frenside proceeds by asking Vance questions, culminating in this last one 'Something you wrought with enchantments, eh?' Vance agrees with this assessment and finds that Frenside's insight, delivered through a series of questions, helps him focus on what he ought to write next:

Instead had charmed his readers by its difference [...] but the spell would soon break because, as Frenside said, his tale had been an "emanation", not a reality. He had given very little of what Frenside called his "tissue" to its making. And now his thoughts turned to *Loot*, the old theme which had haunted him since his first days in New York [...] and his imagination instantly set to work on it (377-8).

Leveling his 'cool classifying eyes' on the work of a young writer (HRB 72), Frenside manages to see what particular thing this novel is trying to be—namely, 'an emanation.' This insight is presented to Vance as a question during a conversation in which the critic does 'not harangue' the young novelist, but asks him 'a series of questions' (qtd. above). This dialogue between Frenside and Vance dramatizes the sort of 'conversation' that Wharton seems to be calling for in 'The Criticism of Fiction,' an exchange wherein critics attempt to use their

knowledge and insight not to apply their clever theories to novels but in an attempt to see 'what particular thing each novel is trying to be.' In a 'Cycle of Reviewing,' she puts the matter as follows, 'the only rules to be considered in art evolve from the inside, and are not to be applied ready-made from without' (UCW 161). In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton reiterates this notion, asserting very firmly that '[t]here can be no greater critical ineptitude than to judge a novel according to *what it ought to have been about*' (206).

Having listened and remained open to the question of what particular thing each novel is trying to be, critics then ought to tell the writer whether the work succeeds in being that thing and, subsequently, whether that thing is something worth being. Put in the exact terms that Wharton uses in 'The Criticism of Fiction,' the critic must ultimately address the question: 'Was the subject chosen worth representing?' (UCW 127). It is in this respect that criticism can be of most value to a writer insofar as it can then illuminate those questions that the text was asking which the writer most likely did not know were being asked, or, in psychoanalytic terms, the unconscious of a novel. Phrased in Laplanchean terms, a literary text contains a question for which even it is not to have the answer, a sub-textual question with which, like the parent addressing an infant with messages weighted with 'more' than he intends, the author has freighted her message (novel) without knowing it. The critic's job is *not* to answer this question that the literary text asks, but to extract it from the welter of the text—to point out that it is, in fact, *being asked*—and to explore the terrain (if any) onto which this question opens. A critic ought, in other words, to address the questions: What does a text indicate? What does it strain towards?

By attempting to see ‘the light it [a novel] casts on questions beyond its borders’ and then trying to survey ‘the width of this luminous zone’ (Wharton *UCW* 127).

In his conversation with Vance Weston, George Frenside employs just this sort of critical procedure. According to Frenside, Vance’s novel is an ‘emanation’—that is what it is trying to be—and, as such, it succeeds, for it is ‘a pretty thing, exquisite.’ The critic then moves to the next question, what does it indicate or strain towards? What light does it cast on ‘questions beyond its borders’? It is here that Frenside finds fault with the young novelist’s work, since ultimately this ‘emanation’ is ‘a thing that leads nowhere’ (*HRB* 377). Vance does not find this critical response insulting. Rather, he embraces it, for this honest appraisal of his first book helps him settle definitively on a subject for his next one.

Questioning American Critics

In 1927, a year before she turned her creative attention to writing *Hudson River Bracketed*, Wharton issued another call for a different kind of criticism. Whereas, in 1914, her article appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* of London, this time she addresses American critics. Published in the July issue of the *Yale Review*, ‘The Great American Novel’ opens with a question: ‘What exactly is meant by that term of “American novel” on which American advertisers and reviewers lay an equal and ever-increasing stress—a stress unparalleled in the literary language of other countries?’ (*UCW* 151). Once again, Wharton constructs her discussion as a response to a question, one that contemporary critical discourse in America begs. As in her letter-to-the-editor

of the *Newport Daily News* (1896) and 'The Criticism of Fiction' (1914), she figures her critical response as an intervention in a wider conversation, a discussion already underway into which she is interjecting her own views. But the content of this conversation into which she intervenes troubles her. She believes American critical discourse is harmful to American writers insofar as critics only praise and champion fiction that conforms to a narrow scope of subject and style, thereby inhibiting American writers from giving free and full rein to their imagination and talent:

in the opinion of recent American reviewers the American novelist must submit to much narrower social and geographical limitations before he can pretend to produce *the* (or *the greatest* or simply *an*) American novel; [...]

First of all, the novelist's scene must be laid in the United States, and his story deal exclusively with citizens of those States, furthermore, [...] it must tell of persons so limited in education and opportunity that they live cut off from all the varied sources of culture which used to be considered the common heritage of English-speaking people. The great American novel must always be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually. (151-2)

She then argues that the notion being put forth by many that some subjects are inherently better (or more 'American') than others is counter-productive and patently untrue: 'The novelist's—any novelist's—proper field, created by his particular way of apprehending life, is limited only by the bounds of his natural, his instinctive interests' (153). She cites Melville as an example, asserting that South Sea cannibals are as fit a subject for American writers as any other, though 'this by no means implies that the cannibal is intrinsically richer [...] than the inhabitants of drawing rooms' (153). For Wharton, it is the *relation* between writer and subject that matters, since '[n]o subject is foreign to the artist in which there is something corresponding to a something within

himself' and 'to enjoin the modern novelist to depict only New Thermopylae in its pristine purity is to singularly limit his field' (153; 157).²⁵ Thus her purpose is two-fold: to highlight what she sees as a confining and unhelpful critical discourse and, by extension, to widen the field of possible subjects for American novelists to consider.

In making this claim, she offers an innovative and, for 1927, radical insight. She argues that Americans have 'internationalized the earth': 'The whole world has become a vast escalator, and Ford motors and Gillette razors' along with 'American plumbing, dentistry, and vocabulary' have 'reduced the globe to a playing-field for our people' (156). In the pages that follow, Wharton describes the ways American culture has infiltrated the world and the way the rest of the world is beginning to impact America, for she sees the arrow traveling both ways. And from this cultural inter-mingling, she believes that there has emerged a 'special field which nomadic habits of modern life have thrown wide open to the American novelist' (157). Wharton, perhaps somewhat surprisingly given scholarly characterizations of her as inextricably bound to tradition (Vita-Finzi 8-9), does not deplore this 'special field.' She views it as a fresh creative opportunity and urges her fellow American novelists to set out and explore this terrain:

Now innumerable links of business, pleasure, study, and sport join together the various races of the world. [...] And the exploring is no longer one-sided. [...] This perpetual interchange of ideas and influences is resulting, on both sides of the globe, in the creation of a new world, ephemeral, shifting, but infinitely curious to study and interesting to note,

²⁵ This notion of writer and subject engaging in a kind of correspondence will be explored at length in Chapter four, since Wharton devotes a good deal of discussion to the idea in *The Writing of Fiction*.

and as yet hardly needed by the novelist. It is useless, at least for the story-teller, to deplore what the new order of things has wiped out, vain to shudder at what it is creating: there it is, whether for better or worse, and the American novelist [...] can best use his opportunity by plunging both hands into the motley welter. (157)

These are hardly the words of someone who can be unproblematically and monolithically characterized as a person whose 'ideal of order is achieved by looking at the principles and practice of the past and applying them to the present' (Vita-Finzi 4). In fact, she is arguing for precisely the opposite, enjoining critics and authors to cease depicting Americans as 'tethered to the village pump' when 'at this very moment America is pouring out her annual millions over the old world' (156). Wharton would like novelists and critics to be more open to subjects beyond Main Street and explore 'the new order of things.' She wants the field of possibility, both critically and creatively, to be widened. In other words, she is urging critics to remain open in Laplanche's sense of the word, that is to say, for them to remain 'available to the other who comes to surprise' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 47). And she does, in fact, believe that the next great novel to emerge from America will take everyone by surprise. Indeed, for Wharton, the 'Great American Novel' is something yet to come, an open question—one she leaves open at the end of her article: 'its scene may be laid in an American small town or in a European capital; it may deal with the present or the past, with great events or trivial happenings [...] and when it appears there is every chance that it will catch us all napping' (158). Such a critical perspective is hardly consistent with assertions that although Wharton was 'an intelligent critic' she was 'not in advance of her time' (Walton 171). In

fact, Wharton's vision of the globalizing forces at work, wherein American corporate consumerism permeates cultures the world over and is, in turn, affected by this permeation is highly prescient.

In sum, 'The Great American Novel' opens with a question ('What is meant by that term "American Novel" [...]?) to which Wharton responds, and her response offers some degree of closure by illustrating the deeply problematic ways critics use the term: 'Still more insistent is the demand of reviewers that the novelist shall deal only with what the wife of our late President touchingly described as "just folks." The idea that genuineness is to be found only in the rudimentary, and that whatever is complex is unauthentic, is a favorite axiom of the modern American critic' (155). Having highlighted the inhibiting nature of contemporary critical discourse in America, she then points out other possible routes of inquiry for American novelists, specifically this 'special field' which she sees 'the nomadic habits of modern life' having opened up for exploration. She ends her article not by answering the question she posed at the beginning (What is the Great American Novel?), but by leaving it open. As a result, critics and/or novelists can transfer this open question of the American novel to an

alternative site of inquiry and offer their own responses.²⁶

But to leave the discussion of Wharton's 'The Great American Novel' here would be disingenuous, for the article does have an unfortunate lapse into centrifugal closure. A long 'Ptolemaic' passage in the middle of the article finds Wharton not only retreating from the full force of her argument, but contradicting herself outright. Having disparaged 'the safe and uniform life' that has resulted from Americans' desire to reduce 'the whole of life to a small house with modern plumbing and heating, a garage, a motor, a telephone, and a lawn undivided from one's neighbor's,' Wharton then sees a problem with her argument (154). How can one disparage narrow-minded provincialism as a fit subject for art and still account for the work of Jane Austen and Gustave Flaubert? Wharton's 'answer' (this is the word she uses, and it is indeed an answer, not a response) is that European provincialism provides inherently richer

²⁶ My analysis of this passage runs counter to that of Penelope Vita-Finzi, whose reading of this article leads her to the conclusion that 'the contemporary American novel is judged by Wharton to be doomed' (20). My argument also diverges from Frederick Wegener's claim that Wharton's 'posture' in this article is 'prescriptive' insofar as it 'endorses postwar American ubiquity' ('Imperialist' 804). Wegener quotes Wharton's opinion that 'it seems as though it would not only be truer to fact but would offer far more lights and shades, more contrasts and juxtapositions, to the novelist, if he depicted the modern American as a sort of missionary-drummer selling his wares and inculcating his beliefs from China to Peru' and reads this as a 'recruitment of the modern American novelist in its [American imperialism] legitimization and perpetuation' (804). On the contrary, Wharton enjoins writers to explore the effects of American consumerism with an eye towards its 'shades' as well as its 'lights.' She advises the American novelist that she 'can best use his opportunity by plunging both hands into the motley welter' (*UCW* 157), which is hardly the language of uncritical endorsement or celebratory triumphalism. Indeed, Wharton declares 'We have, in fact, internationalized the earth, to the deep detriment of its picturesqueness and of many other important things' (*UCW* 156). Wharton is simply arguing that this 'new order of things' is a worthy subject of serious fiction, which is not equivalent to an endorsement. Nancy Bentley offers an alternative reading of this passage, more consonant with my own, in which she sees it as a kind of prescient precursor to ideas of modernity set forth by Anthony Giddens and Arjun Appaduri. Bentley states that Wharton is both absorbed and repelled by this 'new order of things' and finds her attitude towards U.S. expansionism to be 'more wary and critically discriminating' than that of other Americans at the time (Bentley 161). Janet Beer Goodwyn offers yet another reading of this passage, in which she sees Wharton refiguring the 'cultural vocabulary of her native land' as something now applicable to the rest of the world, which has been transformed into a strange, 'dislocating' place, much like the wilderness 'which characterizes American beginnings' (Goodwyn 85).

soil than American parochialism (154). She praises ‘the dense old European order, all compounded of differences and *nuances*, all interwoven with intensities and reticences, with passions and privacies, inconceivable to the millions brought up in a safe, shallow, and shadowless world’ (154). The idea that one version of provincial life is inherently richer than another runs completely counter to her own claim, so eloquently argued, that a writer ought to feel free to take up any subject ‘in which there is something corresponding to a something within himself’ (153). But even more troubling is the sense that ‘order’ takes on when placed in the context of Wharton’s previous comments.

Her point that critics ought not to continually praise works that ape Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* to the exclusion of all else is a fair one: ‘it is permissible to wonder whether, as a theme, Main Street—in a literary sense—has not received as much notice as its width and length will carry’ (153). But her argument quickly descends into an elitist defense of class distinctions, in which, as Frederick Wegener argues, aesthetic and socio-political concerns become blurred.²⁷ Wharton writes that ‘Main Street abounds in the unnecessary, but lacks the one thing needful’ which turns out to be ‘old social organization which provided for nicely shaded degrees of culture and conduct’ (*UCW* 154). In a highly problematic statement, she then criticizes ‘modern America’ for having ‘simplified and Taylorized it [the old social order] out of existence’ (*UCW* 154). By contrasting ‘the dense old European order’ with what she sees as a monochromatic ‘middle class’ America, Wharton ends up not only

²⁷ See ‘Form, “Selection,” and Ideology in Edith Wharton’s Antimodernist Aesthetic’ in Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman, and Candace Waid, Eds. *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton*, University of Delaware Press: London, 1999: 116-138.

contradicting her own argument, but championing the very social hierarchy that her novels so deftly and scathingly criticize. She does, however, seem to sense that something is wrong with what she has just said, though rather than editing it out, she simply loops back to her defense of the creative freedom of the author and repeats her claim for openness: '[t]o the creator, the only needful preliminary to successful expression is to have in him the root of the matter to be expressed' (*UCW* 153). This assertion of creative freedom for the artist, however, then another begs a question, which Wharton fails to leave open: 'Nevertheless, there remains—there must always remain—the question of the amount and quality of material to be extracted from a given subject. Other things being equal, nothing can alter the fact that a “great argument” will give a greater result than the perpetual chronicling of small beer' (153). Here, Wharton repeats the peculiar pattern of asserting the need for total openness on the part of artists and critics then retreating into centrifugal closure by asserting that, in fact, some subjects are richer than others. Wharton has made a claim for the complete freedom of the artist, who ought to be limited only by what resonates ('corresponds') within himself to what solicits him from outside, without giving any thought to the chatter of critics. She then takes up the 'question' that such a claim begs ('Nevertheless, there remains—there must always remain—the question of the amount and quality of material to be extracted from a given subject') and answers it ('[o]ther things being equal, nothing can alter the fact that a “great argument” will give a greater result than the perpetual chronicling of small beer'). The result is a contradictory muddle, in which an argument for openness in Laplanche's sense of the term (that is to say, remaining 'available to

the other who comes to surprise') gives way to a gesture of 'Ptolemaic' closure that is freighted with a socially conservative agenda, thereby leaving her open to charges of elitism and muddled thinking.²⁸

She engages in a similarly unfortunate act of closure several paragraphs later. Here, she takes critics to task for constantly telling American novelists that 'the social and educated being is an unreality unworthy of [his] attention, and that only the man with the dinner-pail is human, and hence available to his purpose' (155). She then asserts that, in fact, such a subject is inferior: 'But what does "human nature" thus denuded consist in, and how much of it is left when it is separated from the web of custom, manners, culture it has elaborately spun about itself?' (155). As before, she then answers this question: 'Only that hollow unreality, "Man", an evocation of the eighteenth-century demagogues who were the first inventors of "standardization" (155). As Frederick Wegener notes, remarks such as these 'openly depart, in fact, from some of Wharton's own wisest, long-cherished tenets as a critic' ('Form' 126). Not only do they depart from her own beliefs and practice as articulated in previous articles ('The Criticism of Fiction,' for instance), they also directly contradict one of her main arguments in this particular article.

But after these unfortunate gestures of closure, in which she contradicts her own argument and puts forth a dubious notion of European superiority and

²⁸ In "Form, "Selection," and Ideology in Edith Wharton's Antimodernist Aesthetic,' Frederick Wegener calls the social conservatism revealed in these 'Ptolemaic' moments 'ideological' and argues that '[u]ltimately, her antimodernist writing not only discloses, with unusual candor, the ideology of Wharton's aesthetic (or the formalism to which she officially subscribed) but unmasks that formalism (and thus her aesthetic) as itself fundamentally ideological in concept and effect' (134). Such an argument can only be made when the 'Ptolemaic' tendencies are isolated from the rest of her argument and amplified to the exclusion of the more 'Copernican' tendencies which the article also contains, and, which, in fact, form the bulk of her article.

troubling defense of class hierarchies, Wharton's argument takes a more 'Copernican' turn, exploring an intriguing aspect of the question she initially set out to explore—namely, what constitutes an 'American' novel?. The question leads her to the interesting observation that, at this point in time (1927), America is, in fact, 'pouring out her annual millions all over the world,' which generates another question that Wharton does, in the end, leave open—as discussed above (156).

The 'Ptolemaic' turn that this article takes in the middle cannot, however, be ignored. Its contradictions and troubling flashes of elitism place this article somewhere between 'The Criticism of Fiction' and 'The Vice of Reading,' for although her answers to certain questions do end up contradicting her overall argument, they do not compromise her insight about the increasingly nomadic character of modern American life, nor do they close off the final question that she leaves open at the end of the article, the undefinable and unpredictable nature of the 'Great American Novel'—a thing that she believes is yet to come.

Unfortunately, the 'Ptolemaic' lapses in a long and predominantly subtle and convincing argument (that critics ought to approach American novels in a more open-minded fashion) are just the sort of passages that scholars have tended to lift and quote out of context in order to characterize Wharton-the-critic as someone with a 'penchant for preaching' (Vita-Finzi 5). Wharton is not arguing, as one scholar has suggested, that 'the conditions of life in America could not possibly produce great art' or that '“the great American novel” was an impossibility by 1927' (Vita-Finzi 20). In fact, a close examination of the entire substance of Wharton's article shows that Wharton's argument contravenes this

claim, since she believes the great American novel was a thing yet to come.

That said, in setting forth this notion, she does slip briefly into declarative 'Ptolemaic' gestures, which make her opinions on the American novel complex and slippery.

If one were to lift out the 'Ptolemaic' middle section discussed above, her analysis would roughly follow Laplanche's third vicissitude.²⁹ She opens the question of the Great American Novel, explores the terrain onto which this question leads (with, admittedly, two moments of closure amid this process), sheds light on fresh terrain that novelists ought to feel free to explore (this 'special field' opened up by the nomadic habits of the 20th century), then suggests that the Great American Novel is still an open question, a thing yet to come. This structure resembles the 'Copernican' structure identified in Felman's 'Women and Madness: a Critical Phallacy' in the opening chapter of this study. But one cannot, in the end, ignore the troublesome and contradictory 'Ptolemaic' middle section, and, as a result, the article ends up being a confused and contradictory piece of work. On the one hand, Wharton engages a 'Copernican' procedure, pursuing a question and, ultimately, leaving the question of the American novel open for her own readers to transfer to an alternative site of inquiry. On the other hand, this 'open question' is greatly compromised by the invidious assertions that end up defending and aestheticizing the class system ('Traditional society, with its old-established

²⁹ The claim could, of course, be made that to eliminate this section would be to misrepresent the entire article, yet how would this be any different than lifting her antimodernist declarations from the piece and analyzing and amplifying them, while muting and/or ignoring her more sensible and 'Copernican' insights, which is precisely what other scholars have done?

distinctions of class, its pass-words, exclusions, delicate shades of language and behavior, is one of man's oldest works of art' (*UCW* 155). Thus, in 'The Great American Novel,' Wharton makes a claim for remaining open and 'available to the other who comes to surprise' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 47), but then closes herself off against certain literary others quite firmly, declaring that certain subjects provide richer soil for aesthetic treatment than others, thereby making precisely the same mistake as the critics she wishes to chastise.

The Challenge of Modernism

Characterizations of Wharton-the-critic as 'shrill and didactic' do not, of course, come from nowhere (Vita-Finzi 39). The sorts of lapses traced above leave Wharton vulnerable to such charges. It is my contention, however, that these tendencies have been over-emphasized to the detriment of her more innovative critical insights and 'Copernican' rhetorical tendencies. But a full portrait of Wharton-the-critic would be incomplete without addressing her more declarative, even reactionary, tendencies. These are especially evident in her discussions of modernist writing, particularly those articles penned later in life. 'The Criticism of Fiction' (1914) leaves the question of modernist writing open: 'It may well be that some new theory of form, as adequate to its new purpose as those preceding it, will be evolved from the present welter of experiment' (*UCW* 124). But her later articles are less successful on this score. However, I would suggest that a close examination of these critical articles yields a more varied and subtle portrait of Wharton's later writing than scholarly characterizations of

her have so far allowed.³⁰ Scholarly characterizations of Wharton's attitude towards modernist writing have tended to fall into two realms. They are viewed as the reactions of a firmly rooted conservative (Lewis, Wegener), or as the wary responses of a prescient observer who saw the misogynist subtexts and totalitarian political tendencies of modernist aesthetics (Sensibar, Bauer). In *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics*, Dale Bauer convincingly suggests that this stark division in scholarly opinion over Wharton's attitude towards modernism is largely the result of Wharton's own contradictory and ambivalent attitude towards modernity (3-5). As a result of this ambivalence, there is plenty of fodder for both views—reactionary conservative and prescient critic—contained in Wharton's writings. Thus the question Nancy Bentley poses—'Was Wharton reactionary or was she politically prescient?'—is largely unanswerable (Bentley 148). In the end, Wharton is *both* reactionary and prescient, vacillating between the two tendencies we see on display in her 1923 letter to Berenson: an inability to connect emotionally with modernist formal experiments coupled with a genuine dismay at her unreponsiveness to the work. That said, I believe when her articles on modernist writing are viewed holistically, her approach reveals itself to be more open than isolated comments lifted out of context often suggest.

³⁰ An exception is Frederick Wegener's "'Enthusiasm Guided by Acumen": Edith Wharton as a Critical Writer' (1996), a detailed and insightful introduction to *The Uncollected Critical Writings* that concludes by characterizing Wharton-the-critic as a 'complex and mercurial' figure (45). As an overview to her critical work, however, his introduction takes a broad-brush approach to her career as a whole, not a detailed examination of specific articles, as I am attempting to do here. In addition, his later articles (1999 & 2000) have focused on her antimodernist tendencies, serving to amplify these at the expense of other less reactionary strains, which are also present in her later critical writings. Her 1934 article on Proust (discussed below) is a fine example of these more 'Copernican' tendencies on display in her late critical work.

Modernist writing both fascinated and disturbed Wharton. Shari Benstock believes that her response was often 'visceral' because she felt 'threatened' by the fact that these formal experiments had 'far-reaching political and social implications' (34-5). But there were more personal concerns at work as well. Modernist writers' formal experimentation challenged her professional identity in profound ways, and this challenge was not aided by contemporary reviewers, who often compared Wharton's post-war novels unfavorably with writers engaging in more formal experimentation. The most famous instance is a review of *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) in the *Saturday Review*, which compared Wharton's new novel unfavorably with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Wharton bristled at the gesture, writing in a letter to John Hugh Smith, 'It is, of course, what an English reviewer [...] reviewing it jointly with Mrs. Woolf's latest, calls it: an old-fashioned novel. I was not trying to follow the new methods' (*Letters* 480). The question of modernist writing was, for Wharton, inescapably and problematically personal, and her responses to it illustrate the degree to which she was often incapable of achieving critical distance, resulting in pieces that, at times, strike strident and discordant notes, as she struggles to sustain the 'Copernican' critical procedure she advocates.

But the question of modernist writing never ceased to provoke Edith Wharton. She was unable, clearly, to foreclose it completely. She was unable to keep its insistent questioning presence from impinging on her. As a result, she wrote several articles on the subject, each of which displays varying degrees of 'Copernican' openness and 'Ptolemaic' closure, as Wharton struggles to 'remain available to the other who comes to surprise me,' not always with a great degree

of success. Her articles on modernist writing illustrate the various vicissitudes this struggle followed, and tracing such vicissitudes reveals the complexity of Wharton's attitude towards modernity.

Twenty years after first raising the question of modernist writing, Edith Wharton returned to it in a pair of articles published several months apart in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Since the later essay ('Permanent Values in Fiction') 'was obviously conceived as a companion piece to its predecessor,' it makes sense to view both articles as a whole (Wegener, Introduction 174FN). Taken together, they show a critical process that begins by retreating into centrifugal closure via declarative statements before giving way, in the next article, to a somewhat more open and interrogative approach.

The first article, 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' (January, 1934), addresses the enigma of modernist writing in a predominantly declarative fashion. Here Wharton acknowledges the difficulty modernist writing poses: 'it is difficult, in judging the new tendencies, to find a common ground for criticism' (170). She then observes that the only 'common ground' these works seem to share is the conviction of their authors that 'every new creation can issue only from the annihilation of what preceded it' (170). She continues by claiming that, in fact, contemporary trends share more with their predecessors than perhaps their practitioners, or the critics, realize: 'the new novelists have picked out of the ruins involving the older culture the odds and ends of some of the very principles they ignore' (170). She then lays out her claim that the stream-of-consciousness technique is nothing more than a revalorization of the 'slice-of-life' story: 'Many of our younger novelists seem innocently to have

rediscovered the facile effects which Zola's generation had worn so threadbare' (171). Here, Wharton raises an interesting question: to what degree do the methods and techniques of modernist writing rely on the traditions they claim to be breaking from? How clean, in other words, is the break from the past in modernist writing? It clearly annoys Wharton that critics have failed to explore this question and have instead chosen to take novelists at their word, becoming, instead of challengers, their 'docile interpreters' (172). Here, she lights on a crucial and insoluble philosophical question: is any act performed by a human individual, in this case, an artist, genuinely random? She does not, however, pose this dilemma as a question, nor does she leave it open. Instead, she asserts that 'the creator must have a conviction to guide him. The conviction of the new group is that there should be none; but this, too, is a system' (172). Here, again, she pin-points a key question of aesthetics: can an artist work without any system whatsoever, however unconscious her system might be, or is the rejection of all previous systems simply another system in itself? But it is not, again, a question that she leaves open, for she believes that an 'unconscious philosophy' supports 'the fabric of their tales' and that critics have shirked their duty in failing to attempt to ferret it out (172).

A reader familiar with Wharton's critical prose will be struck by this essay's lack of specificity. Aside from a passing reference to Katherine Mansfield, 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' trades in abstract generalizations without providing examples. She uses phrases such as 'the new novelists' without mentioning which particular 'new' novelists she has in mind (*UCW* 170). This uncharacteristic penchant for unfounded generalizations is

particularly problematic, given the wide variety of work being written at the time. Does the 'new group' refer to American realists, such as Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, or does she mean those engaging in the sort of formal experiments undertaken by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce? The distinction is an important one, and Wharton fails to make it. Such a lack of specificity comes as a surprise to someone accustomed to the dense and wide-ranging allusions upon which Wharton usually relies.³¹ For all its problems, 'The Great American Novel' includes references to seventeen different works of fiction, ranging from 'La Chartreuse de Parme' to *Lord Jim* to Frank Norris's 'McTeague.' Likewise, 'The Criticism of Fiction' refers to upwards of eleven novelists, plus several French critics, and that is not including her references to H. G. Wells and Henry James, whose critical opinions figure prominently in her discussion. To one used to the difficult task of trying to follow her wide range of her references, their almost total lack comes as a surprise, and a disappointment.

This unfortunate and uncharacteristic decision to limit herself to generalizations was deliberate, as her letter to the editor of *Saturday Review of Literature* attests: 'I would rather deal with modern fiction in a general way than write anything like a study of one or two given authors' (EW to Henry S. Canby, 13 October 1933; Yale). In a subsequent letter, sent along with the article itself, she elaborates: 'I fear you will be disappointed at my not having dealt individually with the work of more of the younger novelists; but it was

³¹ As Frederick Wegener notes in his introduction to *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, she does tend to rely on the same store of allusions and references (35-6). Nonetheless my point stands: her other critical articles do a much better job of using specific examples to illustrate her points, however often she tends to resort to the same examples.

impossible to do so in such a limited space, ... and if I were to say what I think of a good many younger writers, I should be regarded simply as a novelist of the old school incapable of understanding the new generation' (EW to Henry S. Canby, 15 March 1934; Yale). Interestingly, an earlier draft of the article, titled 'Documentation in Fiction,' contains a specific and illustrative reference to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. In this passage, Wharton attempts to unmask the fallacious claim that modernist writing manages to record the uninhibited 'flow of the gelatinous mass' of experience and sensory impression:

[...] in Virginia Woolf's "Mrs Dalloway," hailed when it appeared as one of the text-books of the new school, where the author, apparently weary of noting the formless rush of sensation through her heroine's mind, abruptly abandons Mrs. Dalloway & inserts the reader's mind into that of a couple sitting on a bench in the Park through which Mrs. Dalloway happens to be passing. (Yale)

Wharton's decision to edit out these sentences, to repress, in effect, her analysis of this passage in *Mrs. Dalloway* is unfortunate. The point she makes is a fair one: critics who celebrate these novels for being formless are mistaken, for the author's hand is, in fact, intervening all the time, making decisions about what to include and what to ignore, and as a result of this decision-making process, some constructive system does exist in these novels. It is this constructive system that Wharton believes critics ought to be attempting to discern and articulate, rather than simply celebrating these novels for their alleged formlessness. But without such concrete references to anchor her discussion, Wharton drifts into facile generalizations and ungrounded abstractions.

The existence of this passage in an earlier draft, along with her impulse to edit it out of the final version of the article, highlights an important tendency

in Wharton's critical practice. When faced with particular, individual works of fiction, Wharton is perceptive and attentive. In the act of reading, she is often quite open, in Laplanche's sense of the term, remaining 'available to the other who comes to surprise' her. But when Wharton-the-critic picks up her pen, this open and attentive reader can easily get lost. As her letter to Bernard Berenson attests, she tried to respond to *Ulysses*, and her inability to do so provoked her to ask why she could not. This edited passage from the initial draft of "Tendencies in Modern Fiction" reveals a similar dynamic at work, as the astute and perceptive reader of this particular novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, gets repressed from the final critical response.

This edit reveals something more. What Wharton rejects is not so much modernist writing, but the critical discourse that has grown up around it, which she views as 'docile': 'The experiments of the new novelists, and the comments of their docile interpreters, have proved, in spite of both, that any lasting creative work must be based on some sort of constructive system' (*UCW* 172). Here she is, in effect, repeating the cry she issued in 'The Criticism of Fiction,' calling for criticism that responds to the 'challenge' that novelists are issuing with their work. She wants critics to rise to the challenge of these works, to convince her, in effect, that they are worth reading, for the act of reading itself has not managed to win Wharton over. Perhaps these articles are a kind of plea, issued by a reader who longs for someone to provide her with a way in to this kind of writing, an access route, so that she might be able to appreciate it—much as Jean du Breuil was able to convince her of the need for women's suffrage through a

persuasive Marxist perspective that had not occurred to Wharton before.³² In sum, although 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' is largely declarative in tone and although her argument lacks the necessary specificity, she does touch on crucial paradoxes and dilemmas that modernist writing poses.

Fortunately, her stance shifts towards a more interrogative approach in the companion piece that was published three months later. While 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' opens with a series of statements, 'Permanent Values in Fiction' (April, 1934) opens with a question: 'I can hardly avoid beginning with the question: What constitutes a novel?' (*UCW* 175). Her inquiry then proceeds to unfold as a response to this question—a question inspired by the various forms contemporary novels had begun to take:

To the generation which read Dickens and Thackeray, Balzac and Stendhal, the problem hardly presented itself. The answer floated, so to speak, on the surface of the enquiry: a novel is a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters.

To a generation nurtured on Mr. Joyce and Mrs. Woolf such a definition would seem not only pitifully simple, but far from comprehensive. (175)

What follows is a critique not of modernist novels, but rather, of the critical discourse that surrounds such works. Once again, for all the accusations of anti-modernism, Wharton is, in fact, responding to the challenge of modernist writing by exploring the very question the works of Woolf and Joyce beg—that is to say,

³² In a fascinating passage from her tribute to Jean du Breuil, published in *Revue Hebdomadaire* in 1915, Wharton writes, 'he made me see that the only thing that matters, in the feminist movement, is the fate of those women "whom the brutal economic law of big-city life waits to devour," of those poor hard-working women who accept their long misery with an animal fatalism because they do not know that they have a right to a more humane existence. In short, one would be tempted to say that women who argue for the right to vote could very well do without it, but it is necessary for those women, so much more numerous, who do not even know what it is, or why others are demanding it in their name!' (*UCW* 200-201)

what is a novel?. Her essay does not define the novel according to a strict set of principles and then declare that these new works fail to measure up. Rather, she grants that 'contemporary judgments' such as the one she is now offering, are 'often temporary' and that the task of 'estimating contemporary writers' is ultimately one that can only be performed by successive generations of readers (by 'the verdict of time'), that is to say, Laplanche's 'indeterminate other, to which an infinite and non-returnable message is addressed: the other of the century to come, to paraphrase Stendhal' ('Inspiration' 49). Nonetheless, Wharton still hazards a guess based on past experience, which 'seems to say that two qualities alone survive the test [of time].'

The first of these qualities is 'the creating of characters which so possess us with the sense of their reality that we talk of Anna Karenina, Becky Sharp, the Père Goriot, and Tess as of real people whom we have known and lived with' and the second consists of 'the reasoned relating of their individual case to the general human problem' (177). In other words, Wharton places ultimate authority in estimating modernist novels' value beyond the boundaries of her own—or any other contemporary critic's—ability. It will be for successive generations of readers to judge, and this judgment will be made based simply on whether or not these books are read and, if they are, whether their characters assume the kind of currency in conversations as Anna Karenina or Tess. Do Leopold Bloom and Mrs. Dalloway live and breathe in the minds of subsequent addressees (the others of the century to come)? For Wharton the issue is a highly pragmatic one: have the fictional worlds of Joyce and Woolf, in effect, survived? Are they still taking life in the minds of other readers, or have they

ceased to provoke readers into reading them? Have their imagined worlds
ceased to pull subsequent generations of readers into orbit around them?

This is hardly a reactionary or reductive set of criteria. In fact, it is not
so much a set of criteria as a pragmatic question: do others who are 'out of
reach' and 'scattered in the future' continue to respond to the interpellative pull
of these novels, or, phrased otherwise, do these novels continue to provoke
individuals into reading them (Laplanche, 'Transference' 224)?³³ The question
of modernist novels' value cannot, Wharton claims, be answered by any
contemporary critic, and the way that contemporary critics have gone about
trying to do so is, she argues, misguided and even harmful:

I know no theory more contrary to the free action of genius than the
persuasion that a given formula—alphabet, language, or any generally
accredited form of expression—is worn out because too many people have
used it. When I hear this asserted by critics, and see it tremblingly
accepted by would-be creators, I am reminded of a distressed millionairess
who once said to me: 'My husband and I want to build a country house,
but we don't know what style to choose, for one of my brothers-in-law has
already used the Ionic order, and the other the Corinthian—and the Doric is
really too simple!'

Since the world began, and man pictured his first stories on the
walls of prehistoric caves, forms have been unceasingly and irresistibly
modified by having new life poured into them; for what my distraught
millionairess did not know, but what critics of any of the arts should surely
remember, is the incessant renovation of old types by new creative action.
(176)

³³ I am not suggesting that Wharton was, in fact, a visionary who saw the merits of modernist writing. The tone of her argument seems to indicate that, deep down, she suspects (perhaps hopes) that the novels of Joyce and Woolf will one day be forgotten. My point is simply that she does not condemn modernist writing out of hand and that, in fact, she tries to respond to the question these novels ask (what is a novel?). Her critical response advocates not a set of principles, but a process. This process is akin to what Laplanche sees as a dynamic that is fundamental to the 'poetic situation,' that is to say, the crucial fact of the question of address. Wharton, I am arguing, sees literary merit as determined by a set of pragmatics, a process that is inextricable from the question of address that is inherent to the poetic situation. Wharton's pragmatic test of literary value involves asking a simple question: Does a text continue to provoke succeeding generations of readers to read it?

In effect, Wharton is brushing up against what continues to be a vexed question, for she claims that insofar as modernist novels may prove to be valuable, their value will arise from the degree to which they reinvent old forms. Here, once again, she pinpoints an issue scholars continue to debate: to what extent are those novels we label 'modernist' breaking with the past and constructing new forms, and to what extent are they simply re-constructing more 'traditional' forms? However partial her attempt, Wharton *does* try to take modernist writing on its own terms: she *sees* one of the questions it contains (what is a novel?), transfers that question to an alternative site of inquiry (a critical article), and attempts to respond. While her response is partial, and fairly unsatisfying, that she had the prescience and the critical insight to pose this question at all is far from a common assumption in Wharton scholarship. The unsatisfactory degree to which she explores the question, once posed, is frustrating; and as a result, 'Permanent Values in Fiction' is another example of 'Ptolemaic' strains interwoven with her more 'Copernican' critical tendencies.

Here again, Wharton offers a prescient insight—that modernist writing relies far more on 'tradition' than either writers or contemporary critics are willing to admit—only to retreat from the full force of its implications. But these are not the only two articles that Wharton wrote in 1934, a fact that has been almost unilaterally ignored by scholars, even those who address her late criticism. 'Tendencies of Modern Fiction' and 'Permanent Values in Fiction' (sometimes in combination with 'The Great American Novel' though not always) are generally set forth as the sum total of Wharton's late critical work. But this is not accurate, for in 1934, the very same year that 'Tendencies of

Modern Fiction' and "Permanent Values in Fiction" appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Wharton also published an article on Proust.

'A Reconsideration of Proust' opens with the story of how the article came to fruition, a story that figures this critical act as a response to a request. This request for an article on Proust reaches Wharton while she is on holiday in the West Highlands. Wharton then tells us that since her imagination was, at that moment, taken up by the work of John Buchan and 'the calm, ruddy faces of Highland chieftains and their wives,' she immediately penned a 'cable of refusal' (*UCW* 179). But before sending it off, she has an idea: 'it suddenly struck me that, if I *could* fish up and reconstitute Proust (*my* Proust, that is, for such evocations are necessarily subjective) out of the bottom of a dark Scottish loch, or a Jacobite cavern on a stormy moor, I should have applied a far severer test to his genius than if his books were under my hand, and the Parisian air in my lungs' (179). Before launching this experiment, Wharton figures the interpretive project she is about to undertake as the response to a question: 'For, after all, what constitutes the ultimate proof of creative genius but the degree to which it penetrates and becomes a part of the intelligence on which it acts?' (180).

Both these statements show an interesting development in Wharton's conception of the act of reading. Whereas in 1903, she put forth the idea that novels mean different things to different readers then retreated from the implications of contingent meaning, here the notion has become a given. She writes of '*my* Proust' acknowledging parenthetically, as if it were almost too obvious to require stating, that 'such evocations are necessarily subjective.'

Likewise, she speaks of Proust's work becoming 'a part of the intelligence' of his readers, in this case, Wharton herself. Wharton then goes on to clarify certain particulars about the individual subjectivity that is encountering and, to use her word, reconsidering Proust: 'It is necessarily from the novelist's point of view that I make the experiment [...] Therefore what I say of Proust must be regarded as the view on a fellow-craftsman' (180). In short, Wharton not only accepts that meaning differs with each reader, but situates herself within a certain position. Wharton is reading *as a novelist*, from the point of view of a reader who also writes imaginative works herself, a 'fellow-craftsman.' Here, reading is explicitly conceived as a highly subjective enterprise, an event that differs from one individual to another. As such, what Wharton's readers are witnessing is an active process, as opposed to a tidy critical product: 'If I can succeed in fishing Marcel Proust up alive out of the depths of my mind I may have performed a more interesting feat than any "study" I might have written after contentiously rereading him' (180).

What this process reveals is a reader so open and 'available to the other who comes to surprise' her that she, in fact, gives herself over to it entirely and enthusiastically in spite of certain flaws. Wharton feels 'his intellectual speculations' and 'Bergsonian metaphysics' hamper his work insofar as they too often 'crowd his people and their actions from the foreground' (180-1). Yet she immediately follows this observation with an enthusiastic and probing question: 'But what, after all, does that matter, when, however often he pushes them out of the way, their uncanny vitality always forces them back into their rightful place? [...] We forgive everything else to the magician who makes us believe in his

imperious people' (181). These are hardly the words of someone who possesses inflexible aesthetic principles and approaches all modernist writing with cold hauteur and an unyielding eye.

After bringing Proust's characters vividly back to life from the depths of her memory, Wharton steps back to consider ways in which her opinion of his work has changed since she first read it. In re-assessing her initial response to his work, she articulates a variation on the theme that runs throughout her criticism on modernist writing:

When 'Du Côté de chez Swan' gave us its first electrical shock I suppose we all thought: 'Here is an innovator! Here is new wine in the bottle!' But, though there is a certain sense in which genius is always new, the great originators draw as much from the past as from the present—and Proust was no exception. (182)

This observation, that he was more a renovator than an innovator, begs the question 'what mark has he made on the generation succeeding him' which Wharton answers with the glib reply, 'None!' (183).

Thus Wharton's article on Proust follows a familiar pattern, commencing with 'Copernican' openness and sustaining it as long as this particular text is the focus of her discussion. But as soon as Wharton steps away from Proust's work—away from the process of 'fishing up' Swan and Odette and the Duchesse de Guermantes from the depths of her memory—and turns to address more abstract critical issues, her discussion lapses into 'Ptolemaic' closure. She begins by posing a question—can she access Proust from memory alone?—and she responds to this question by following an investigative process that involves dredging up her own version of Proust and trying to bring him alive for her

readers. This lively process, which requires that she ‘remain available’ to the possible surprises of the other lodged within her own consciousness, is one that thrills Wharton, and she rises to the challenge and enthusiastically manages to bring Proust’s characters back to life for her own readers. This feat then leads her to pose another question—what influence has he had on contemporary writers?—and, instead of responding to this question, she answers it, closing off any possible alternative responses others might have, while simultaneously closing herself off from the possibility that Proust might, in fact, have anticipated certain elements of postwar fiction.

Such multiple movements—in which more ‘Copernican’ interrogative openness gives way to ‘Ptolemaic’ retreat—characterize Wharton’s critical articles, or, more precisely, those works where she takes criticism itself as her subject. But in addition to characterizing the movements within particular articles, this complex dynamic, in which openness gives way quickly to closure and vice versa, also characterizes her critical practice as a whole.

Conclusion

Wharton’s critical practice does not cohere into a consistent teleology. Although it is commonly asserted and widely assumed that her later work is her most censorious and narrow-minded, in fact, ‘The Vice of Reading’ (1903), one of her earliest critical articles, is her most intolerant and censorious. Here, her insight that meaning is contingent and varies from reader to reader gets completely undermined by an elitist invective leveled against a creature she dubs ‘the mechanical reader.’ And yet, two years after publishing ‘The Vice of

Reading,' Wharton wrote her reviews of Howard Sturgis's *Belchamber* (1905) and Maurice Hewlett's *The Fool Errant* (1905), both of which practice a predominantly 'Copernican' critical procedure, treating each work as a unique individual to be addressed through an interrogative interpretive procedure. In both reviews, Wharton is making a strong effort to remain open in Laplanche's sense of the word—that is to say, she 'remain[s] available to the other who has come to surprise' her, or, in Wharton's own phrase, she tries to find out 'what particular thing each particular novel is trying to be' and discuss it on those terms. In other words, in the earliest phase of her critical work, Wharton's actual critical practice is far more 'Copernican' than her 'Ptolemaic' declarations about 'the mechanical reader' might lead us to believe.

In 1914, Wharton outlines this 'Copernican' interpretive procedure in 'The Criticism of Fiction'. This piece of critical writing shows Wharton at her most nuanced, responsive, and subtle. Throughout the entire piece, there is only one mild declarative lapse towards the end, and it is a lapse that does not undermine the rest of her argument—which advocates a 'Copernican' critical procedure that will allow critics to get an idea of 'what particular thing each particular novel is trying to be' through an interpretive practice that proceeds by asking questions and then assess books on those terms, rather than through an abstract set of 'ready-made' standards 'applied from the outside' (*UCW* 161). As stated previously, Wharton herself follows this procedure when reviewing individual novels, as her reviews of Howard Sturgis's *Belchamber* and Maurice Hewlett's *The Fool Errant* illustrate, but she is less successful when addressing more abstract critical questions, as 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' and 'The

Great American Novel' attest. When exploring such questions as 'What is a novel?' and 'What is an American novel?,' Wharton tends to drift into unfounded generalizations, as penetrating insights quickly open onto territory Wharton would rather not explore. As a result of Wharton's reluctance to accept or explore the full ramifications of such insights, articles devoted to more abstract questions often end up giving way to centrifugal closure.

But even though 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' is predominantly declarative, instructing more than inquiring, it still does not reach the level of reactionary fervor that 'The Vice of Reading' does—especially when 'Tendencies' is treated together with its companion piece, 'Permanent Values in Fiction,' which advocates evaluating modernist writing through a set of pragmatics, as opposed to abstract principles. And, in fact, Wharton is true to her word, for her article on Proust does just that, employing a set of pragmatics as a means of evaluating his work and lapsing into centrifugal closure only when she turns to the more abstract question of artistic influence. Once again, when she is discussing Proust's work itself, not abstract questions that arise from that discussion, she is responsive, open, engaged, lively, and subtle. Any generalizations about her later work must take this fact into account, for 'A Reconsideration of Proust' was published in 1934.

Further tangling this complex web of progressions and regressions is her attitude towards contingency of meaning. Whereas she asserts and then closes off completely the notion of contingent meaning in 1903, by 1934 she accepts the idea without hesitation, blithely referring to the fact that her version of Proust will differ from other readers' versions in a parenthetical aside. In this

instance (her attitude towards contingent meaning), one can chart a clear trajectory from closure to openness over the course of thirty years, but such a firm line is far more difficult to draw in other areas. For instance, her opinions on modernist writing form a fairly tangled web, which goes a long way towards explaining why scholarly opinion on her attitude towards modernism is so starkly divided. She leaves the question of modernist writing open in 1914, but by 1934, she is quite closed off to it. That said, Wharton cannot be unproblematically labeled 'antimodernist' insofar as she sees and tries to address the question modernist writing begs—what is a novel?—even though her own attempts to address it are fitful and inadequate.

Complicating the issue further is the asymmetry between Wharton's approach to individual works and her response to abstract critical dilemmas. Addressing individual texts, she is invariably an insightful and perceptive reader, even when the novel in question engages in the formal experiments she so often derides. Her discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway* in her original draft of 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' shows a reader acutely attentive to the processes unfolding in a novel that other critics, she feels, have missed. Likewise, her letter to Bernard Berenson reveals a reader uneasy with her inability to be 'responsive' to Joyce's *Ulysses*, wondering why she is unable to connect with a book that so many others have praised. When confronting individual novels, as a reader, Wharton is generally open to the text in hand, eager to respond and generally forgiving of what are, to her mind, its flaws as long as the book manages to transport her to that imagined realm, which is 'in our daily world yet not of it' (UCW 250). Her effusive celebrations of Proust, in which she always notes his flaws then drowns

them in praise, are a case in point. Joyce's failure to transport Wharton to this realm has been given undue attention, I suggest, allowed to play too large a role in characterizing her attitude towards modernist writing.

Her 1934 article on Proust also complicates any tidy generalizations about her late critical writings, since the first half of the article abounds in generous praise, celebratory remarks, and lively efforts to reanimate Proust's characters via a 'Copernican' procedure in which she fishes about in the depths of her memory to see what Proustian surprises await her there. The enthusiastic openness and lively excitement of this article run counter to generalizations of her 'later period' as being characterized by 'deepening intolerance, reactionary hauteur, and abrasive antimodernism' (Wegener, Introduction 44). In addition, Wharton's avid appreciation of Proust makes labeling her 'antimodernist' highly problematic insofar as such a label rejects Proust as a modernist writer, a highly debatable assumption.

If one generalization can be made about Wharton's critical writing, it is that, when confronting individual texts, she tends to practice the 'Copernican' procedure that she advocates in 'The Criticism of Fiction,' but when addressing more abstract questions of criticism, she founders. As a result, articles that treat abstract theoretical questions often yield incisive insights, which Wharton then closes herself off against, lapsing from inquiry into declaration, from exploration to instruction. The notable exception is 'The Criticism of Fiction,' which manages to advocate and sustain a largely 'Copernican' procedure throughout.

'The Criticism of Fiction' is, to my mind, a high water-mark of Wharton's critical writing. No other critical article manages to achieve its level

of subtlety, insight, and 'Copernican' openness. The date of its publication—May, 1914—seems significant. Julie Olin-Ammentorp claims that '[t]he war was a watershed not only in Wharton's life but in her career as a writer' and that it marks a 'sharp divide' in her work (26). For Wharton, the war was an attack on civilization itself, and she, along with the majority of the French, never doubted that it had to be fought and that the price of victory, though high, was worthwhile. As a result, Ammentorp argues 'most if not all of Wharton's postwar work can be seen as a meditation on the question of civilization' (220). And it was a question that vexed Wharton greatly, since 'the postwar world was, strangely, no longer the civilization Wharton had done everything in her power to save' (222).

Perhaps it is her struggle with these questions—what did we fight for? what has become of what so many died to save? and of what does civilization, in fact, consist in the end?—that triggers Wharton's reactionary assertions about modernist writing. It is certainly possible that, as someone who viewed the war as an assault on civilization itself and who witnessed first-hand the devastation this assault wrought, she would cherish and extol that 'civilization' over fervently at times. Perhaps, she took rather too personally the attacks she saw modernist writing wreaking on a 'civilization' that, to Wharton's own mind, so many had fought and died defending.³⁴ It is also possible that, given the degree to which her articles often seem to be addressed more to critics than to writers or

³⁴ Julie Olin-Ammentorp contrasts Wharton's attitude towards the war with that of English and American writers, locating Wharton's attitude as more firmly aligned with the French: 'Ezra Pound would describe the Great War as a senseless conflict fought "for an old bitch gone in the teeth/ For a botched civilization" [...] But Wharton, like many of her generation, and in spite of her increasing understanding of the war's cost, could never take this view' (219).

readers, Wharton was far more bothered by the *theories* used to defend modernist writing than by the writing itself. Indeed, a glance at even a partial list of writers that Wharton admired during the postwar years (Colette, André Gide, Alberto Moravia, W.B. Yeats, Aldous Huxley) reveals a reader who enjoyed an incredibly wide range of fiction, including books, such as *The Great Gatsby*, which scholars now view as a hallmark of American modernism. Perhaps she did become more suspicious, even fearful, of what she took to be denigrations of what so many had fought so long and hard for, the ‘civilization’ that people she knew had died fighting for—denigrations which are certainly implicit in much of modernist writing, but which, when amplified by critics and reviewers, made Wharton incredibly uneasy. In other words, perhaps she was able to accept the kind of critique of modern civilization in Huxley’s *A Brave New World*, a book Wharton praised and enjoyed a great deal, but instinctively recoiled from any critical justifications based on the claim that the war had annihilated civilization. For someone who believed that the French were fighting to save civilization, and that this victory had been achieved, an argument that ran counter to such a claim would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to accept. But this is a mere parenthesis.

Overall, Wharton is most successful and consistent in employing the critical procedure she advocates when treating particular works (her book reviews and articles on Proust, for instance) or when responding to a particular claim made by a particular critic (such as in ‘The Criticism of Fiction’ which responds to Henry James, primarily, but also to several other critical voices of the day, such as H. G. Wells). In addition, although Wharton’s test for value in

art is somewhat murky, by and large, it consists of a set of pragmatics, an interpretive procedure that unfolds through the process of asking questions—does the fictional world of a given text survive the test of time insofar as it continues to provoke and interpellate readers in subsequent generations?—as opposed to a fixed set of principles to be uniformly applied, and against which a work of art would be strictly measured.

Although Wharton's treatment of the subject of criticism in the abstract is characterized by several 'Copernican' tendencies, which succumb to varying degrees of centrifugal closure, as she, at times, instinctively retreats from the full force of the insights that her 'Copernican' procedure yields, her treatment of individual works, as noted above, tends to resist such 'Ptolemaic' lapses. And yet, two novel reviews hardly provide a definitive picture of her critical practices. A fuller picture of how Edith Wharton responded to particular works of art requires a far more sustained examination of other texts. Particularly revealing are Wharton's extensive writings about visual art, specifically, *A Motor Flight Through France* and *Italian Villas and their Gardens*, both of which provide useful insights into Wharton-the-critic at work.

Chapter 3

Critical Practices

‘There remains a field of observation wherein the mere lover of beauty
can open the eyes and sharpen the hearing of the receptive traveler.’

—Edith Wharton
A Backward Glance

Throughout her long and prolific career, Edith Wharton struggled constantly with the question of critical interpretation. And for her, the critical enterprise was indeed a *question*, one that never ceased to provoke her. The previous chapter explored how Wharton addressed this question in writings that took criticism as their explicit subject. This exploration sought to trace and amplify several characteristics of Wharton’s critical writing that might be considered ‘Copernican’ in Laplanche’s sense of the term—that is to say, techniques that underscore and reinscribe the primacy of the other as the force that initiates any interpretive act. Or, in Laplanche’s own words, since ‘this movement of translation [interpretation] has as its origin the “fixed mover” of the enigmatic address of the (external) other,’ to what extent do Wharton’s translations of her encounters with cultural enigmas reinscribe this dynamic (‘Ucs.’ 101)?

At times, in Wharton’s critical writings, this ‘other’ is a literary text. Other times, it is an idea (or ideas) put forth by someone else, another critic, a fellow writer, and so on. But regardless of what or who occupies the position of ‘other’ (text, cathedral, garden, critic, friend, fellow writer, or several of these entities at once), Wharton’s critical writings often employ techniques that reinscribe the primacy of this other (which is, quite often, topographically

dispersed insofar as her work responds to multiple others at once, for instance, literary texts themselves and the critics who have written about those texts). The previous chapter argues that the tendencies that consistently characterize Wharton's critical writings are 1) figuring her critical act as a response to the provocation of another (or others), 2) conceiving of criticism as a multi-voiced conversation of epistolary exchange among several parties with whom she is attempting to correspond, and 3) pursuing criticism via a predominantly interrogative approach that attempts to address each work-of-art as a unique entity and assess it on its own terms. These characteristic traits all serve to reinscribe the 'centripetal' vector that initiates any act of criticism, and, as such, mark Wharton as an early, if at times hesitant and imperfect, practitioner of 'Copernican' criticism.

While the previous chapter focused on Wharton's critical writing took criticism itself as their subject, the critic's dilemma is one she addresses not only when writing about criticism *per se*. Whether confronting French Cathedrals, Italian gardens, the city of Rome, or George Sand's home at Nohant, Wharton grapples with the particular work that stands before her *and* with the larger question of how critics ought to respond to works-of-art in general.

Wharton often figures this critical dilemma in linguistic terms. An interior decorator is a letter-writer who 'called upon to write a letter in the English language, but is ordered, in doing so, to conform to the Chinese or Egyptian rules of grammar' (*DH* 18); an architect is warned against thinking that he can 'originate a whole new architectural alphabet' (*DH* 15); an Italian garden is text where flowers are a mere 'parenthetical grace'—a book that the garden

lover must try to read instead of simply pronouncing it ‘*untranslatable*’ as ‘some critics have thence inferred’ (*IG* 12), while a traveler to Amiens ‘presents a blank page for the town to write its name on’ and ‘the autograph consists of one big word: the cathedral. Other, fainter writing may come out when one has leisure to seek for it; but the predominance of those mighty characters leaves, at first, no time to read between the lines’ (*MF* 7). In other words, Wharton is constantly wrestling with the question Felman poses at the end of her article: ‘how *should* we read?’ Or, more precisely, how should we *respond* to a work-of-art? How should critics undertake analyses of the artistic enigmas that address, interpellate, and provoke them?

In *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, Carol Singley argues that Wharton’s writing ‘reflects both a mind and a spirit intensely engaged in abstract questions’ and suggests that we ought to seek Wharton in the library as well as in the drawing room, ‘voraciously consuming volumes of philosophy, history, art, science, and religion, as well as literature’ (xi). Singley’s book deftly traces the degree to which Wharton engages certain ‘abstract questions’ in her fiction, which, according to Singley, ‘reveals how systematically she pursued difficult spiritual and philosophical questions’ (xii). I would suggest that her books on gardens, domestic interiors, and the French countryside also grapple with ‘abstract questions’—though the questions I would stress are of a slightly different nature than the ones Singley identifies in Wharton’s fiction. My aim, however, corresponds with Singley’s insofar as I would like to suggest that Wharton’s books on travel, home decoration, and gardens are far more than the pet projects of a wealthy aristocratic writer.

This is hardly a novel claim. For the past two decades, scholars have recognized that what initially appear to be whimsical, romantic impressions of Italy and France offer key insights into Wharton's life and work. For Janet Beer Goodwyn, Wharton's travel writings suggest a topographical approach to her fiction, yielding fresh insights into how Wharton conceived her native land and into how her later novels negotiate the 'cultural dislocations' of turn-of-the-century society in Europe and in America (154). For Mary Suzanne Schriber, *A Motor-Flight Through France* is a finely wrought and incisive record of *belle-époque* France as well as a key text in understanding Wharton's expatriation, while *In Morocco* illustrates, for Schriber, the degree to which Wharton's travels were inextricable from her position in pre-war colonial structures. It is this more troublesome terrain of Wharton's colonial imbrications that Judith Sensibar has examined in Wharton's travel writings on Morocco. Alternatively, Susan Batcos sees *In Morocco* as veiled autobiography, a self-portrait in some ways more accessible than the one Wharton provides in *A Backward Glance*. Sarah Bird Wright takes an expansive view of the travel writings and includes *The Decoration of Houses*, whose decorative principles are meant for Americans, but which draws its examples from Europe.¹

¹ See Janet Beer Goodwyn's *Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters*, London: Macmillan, 1990; Mary Suzanne Schriber's 'Edith Wharton and Travel Writing as Self-Discovery' *American Literature* 59 (May 1987): 257-67 and Schriber's 'Edith Wharton and the Dog-Eared Travel Book' in *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe*, Katherine Joslin and Alan Price, Eds. New York: Peter Lang, 1993. See also Judith Sensibar's 'Edith Wharton as Propagandist and Novelist: Competing Visions of "The Great War"' in *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton*, Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman, and Candace Waid, Eds. London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1999, 149-171; Stephanie Batcos's 'A "Fairy tale every minute": The Autobiographical Journey and Edith Wharton's *In Morocco* in Colquitt, Clare et al, pp. 172-187; and Sarah Bird Wright's *Edith Wharton's Travel Writing: The Making of a Connoisseur*, New York: St. Martin's, 1997.

This chapter will attempt to offer yet another point in this critical constellation, as I approach Wharton's travel writings as exercises in criticism—sophisticated and subtle attempts to grapple with the aesthetic and critical quandaries that intrigued and provoked Wharton throughout her life. *A Motor-Flight Through France* and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* offer not only a glimpse of Wharton-the-critic at work, but further evidence of how seriously Wharton took the question of criticism and how subtle, insightful, and various were her attempts to respond to its challenges. Just as the previous chapter focused on examining each critical article as a whole, this chapter also takes a holistic approach to her responses to the works-of-art Wharton encountered on her travels. The density and complexity of her written responses to cathedrals and gardens make it necessary to quote long passages from her work. Since my aim is to trace the tendencies that run throughout each response, I have preceded each discussion with the full text of the passage in question. While perhaps there are times when it is a bit ungainly to have so much text quoted at once, it seemed the best way to proceed, given that my aim is to treat her responses holistically. In addition, such an approach allows my own readers to experience the rhythms of her critical practices, those dynamic oscillations that characterize her responses to cultural enigmas. While the previous chapter took a holistic approach to her articles in order that a rounded portrait of Wharton-the-critic might emerge, this chapter has a slightly different aim—namely, to examine Wharton-the-critic at work in other settings to discover whether her responses to individual works-of-art sustain a predominantly 'Copernican' procedure, or whether, as in the articles discussed

in the previous chapter, these responses are marked by significant lapses into ‘Ptolemaic’ closure.

This chapter strives to witness how Edith Wharton engaged with individual works-of-art, both as a cultural observer (or traveler) and as a creator herself, and, more precisely, how she re-presented those engagements for readers. As a result, this chapter covers a wider range of territory than the previous one. First, I discuss Wharton’s response to some of the works-of-art that she encountered during her travels through the French countryside in the early years of the twentieth century (1906, 1907, 1908). Initially published as a series of travel essays in the *Atlantic Monthly*, these articles were later revised and collected in a full-length book, *A Motor-Flight through France*, published in 1908. This chapter concerns itself with how, precisely, Wharton responded to the cathedrals at Amiens, Bourges, Rheims and Beauvais, along with a discussion of her two visits to George Sand’s home at Nohant. These examinations attempt to explore in detail how Wharton’s responses to these cultural sites unfold and to reveal the interpretive procedures they employ and advocate. While *Motor-Flight* is rife with references to towns, villages, chateaux, and many objects of cultural and aesthetic interest, it is the Gothic Cathedrals and George Sand’s home at Nohant that provoke the most sustained and in-depth treatment from Wharton. It is in these instances that she ponders most explicitly and most pointedly the critical dilemma. As a result, it is on these passages that I have chosen to focus my discussion.

After examining Wharton’s responses to French cathedrals, I then move on to address the question that those responses beg—namely, what is the relation

between the 'critical faculty' and the creative impulse? Or, phrased otherwise, how does the interpretive procedure Wharton advocates and employs when discussing works-of-art relate to how she conceives the act of creation? This question is explored through a discussion of *Italian Gardens and their Villas* and her novel, *Hudson River Bracketed*, which dramatizes the interpretive procedure advocated and employed in *Motor-Flight* and *Italian Gardens*. In *Hudson River Bracketed*, however, this interpretive procedure is put to creative ends, though, as will become clear, these two pursuits (critical and creative) are, in fact, inextricably linked for Wharton.

Each exploration, each shift from one text to another, unfolds organically from the discussion that precedes it. As one exploration gives rise to another question, I have attempted to transfer that question to an alternative site of inquiry and proceed accordingly. This chapter is, in other words, an attempt not only to illustrate the degree to which the 'Copernican' interpretive procedure Wharton advocates and adopts informs her work, but also to practice that interpretive procedure myself. By 'Copernican' interpretive procedure, I mean something very specific: an interpretive stance that involves responding to the artistic enigma that solicits, provokes, and interpellates by transferring the hollowed out transference. As explained in chapter one, it is a critical response to a work-of-art that seeks to maintain the sharp goad of the artistic enigma, keeping the question for which even it is not to have an answer open, while still achieving some measure of critical closure.

The question that sets this chapter in motion, the one that has led me from her critical articles to *A Motor-Flight Through France*, is relatively simple:

how does Wharton respond to the *individual* artistic enigmas that address and provoke her, beyond the two novel reviews examined in the previous chapter? Of course, this question quickly gives rise to a host of others, which will also inform my discussion: Does she ever close herself off to the enigmas she encounters on her travels by lapsing into the kinds of ‘Ptolemaic’ gestures that tend to compromise most of her critical articles? Or do her attempts to interpret the cultural enigmas that provoke and interpellate her during her travels manage to sustain a ‘Copernican’ approach throughout—thereby following Laplanche’s third vicissitude? That is to say, do Wharton’s responses to individual works-of-art yield some degree of knowledge or cognition, or are they more often exercises in acknowledgement and recognition?

Exploring France

In a letter to Edith Wharton dated 2 July 1906, Henry James refers enviously to the Whartons’ recent trip through France. Accompanied by her brother, Harry Jones, Edith and Teddy Wharton had spent the last two weeks of May traveling from the Channel Coast down to Clermont-Ferrand, stopping along the way in Arras, Amiens, Beauvais, Rouen, Nantes, Versailles, Fontainebleau, Orleans, Tours and, to Henry’s James’s envy, Nohant—George Sand’s home near the town of La Châtre. Writing to Wharton, who had by this time already returned to Lenox, Massachusetts, James waxes:

To think you have seen La Châtre!—& that you might move me over to Ashfield again & tell me about it as we go! With these grimaces, you see, I try to pluck the javelin from my side. But it will really stick there, poisoning my blood, till you *write*—I mean till you PRINT, till you “do” the place, the whole impression for me under stress of imminent

publication. For of course you *are* doing, you *have* done that. You can't *not*. I yearn & languish. [...] you owe me a *récit*. There has been, you know, no *récit* (of the impression of the place) of any sort of authority or value but George's own. How you must have *smelt* them all! (Powers 65-6).

Most of Wharton's letters to Henry James do not survive, so it is impossible to ascertain whether 'dear Edith' obliged her friend's request. However, the next letter that Henry James writes to her, dated 17 November 1906, suggests that she did not furnish him with the much desired '*récit*.' In this letter, posted four months later by which time Wharton was back in France for the winter, James reiterates his request:

I will most assuredly hie me as promptly as possible across the scant interspace of the Channel, the Pas de Calais &c: where the very first question on which I shall beset you will be your adventures & impression of Nohant—as to which I burn & yearn for fond particulars. (Powers 67)

Much has been made of James's epistolary exhortation that Wharton 'DO NEW YORK,' but it is interesting to note his insistent, and repeated, request that Wharton also 'do' Nohant—that she 'PRINT [...] the whole impression for me under stress of imminent publication' (Powers 34; 65).² Just as 'The Criticism of Fiction' is a response to an article James had written for the *Times Literary Supplement* several months before, Wharton's description of Nohant could also be read as a response to her 'cher Maître.' Given this pair of letters from James, each begging for an 'impression,' Wharton might well have had him in mind as she set out to bring Nohant alive for her readers. In other words, Henry James might be said to occupy the position Laplanche describes as

² Capital letters are original to James's letter.

that of the individual who stands in for the anonymous addressee, the one 'behind whom looms the nameless crowd, addressees of the message in a bottle' (Laplanche, 'Transference' 224).³

Viewed in such a light, her 'impression' of Nohant in *Motor-Flight* can be seen as another example of Wharton practicing interpretation via correspondence, a kind of epistolary criticism in which her responses to the cultural enigmas she encounters on her travels treat a variety of 'others.' First, there is the 'other' to whom her response is addressed, Wharton's own readers, that 'enigma' that Laplanche identifies as placing the critic in the peculiar position of being 'caught between two stools: the enigma which is addressed to him, but also the enigma of the one he addresses, his public' ('Transference' 224). In addition to the 'nameless crowd,' the enigmatic others who are her anonymous addressees (for whom Henry James might have been a stand-in), there is another enigmatic other, that is, the subject itself—Nohant.

Wharton's first trip to George Sand's home begins in the realm of imagination, as, in a sense, all travels do, since one's experience of a place is nearly always preceded by an idea or image, however unconscious, of what the place might be like. Wharton not only acknowledges that her destination is 'encrusted and overgrown with associations,' but indicates what her own particular associations are—namely, images derived from Sand's novels as well as from her memoir, *Histoire de ma vie* (MF 38).

Before setting off down the road to Nohant, Wharton admits that she and her traveling companions sat around the breakfast table, and 'irreverently

³ This dynamic was discussed at length in the previous chapter.

pictured some of these great personages—List, Sainte-Beuve, Gautier, Dumas fils, Flaubert—illustrious figures in the queer dishabille of travel [...] seated in that very room over their coffee and omelette' (40). Upon arrival, she glimpses a 'pretty goose-girl' who 'might really, in the classic phrase of sentimental travel, have "stepped out" of one of the novels written yonder' and, as a result, 'formed, at any rate, a charming link between our imagination and the famous house' (42). Thus Wharton begins her encounter in the realm of imagination. She is traveling to a place 'encrusted and overgrown with associations' and her first moments seem to confirm those expectations (38). Of the surrounding village, she writes:

Like the goose-girl, these little houses are surprisingly picturesque and sentimental; and their mossy roofs, their clipped yews, the old white-capped women who sit spinning on their doorsteps, supply almost too ideal an answer to one's hopes. (44)

Is her encounter with Nohant, then, a tidy 'answer to one's hopes' and nothing more? Is Wharton's response to this place a series of re-cognitions that confirm her imagined expectations? Does the image that she projects seal her off to anything that falls outside that projection, foreclosing any possibility of knowledge of the other? Does her response, in other words, contain the

possibility of knowledge, or is it simply an act of acknowledgement?⁴

Wharton describes her experience at Nohant as a process of re-vision, for her initial image of the place is slowly unsettled and altered: 'The first surprise is to find the place, one the whole, so much more—shall one say?—dignified and decent [...] than the early years of the life led in it' (45). Wharton then reels through a vivid list of the 'pictures of Nohant' gleaned from Sand's *Histoire de ma vie* and admits that 'somehow, unreasonably of course, one expects the house to bear, even outwardly, some mark of that dark disordered period' (45). But as Wharton continues to recall 'the strange procession which continued to stream through the house' while simultaneously being confronted with the concrete visage of the house itself, this expectation fades. It is displaced by her actual experience of the place, evidenced by a shift in verb tense as present ('one expects [...]') gives way to past:

One expected the scene of these confused and incessant comings and goings to wear the injured *déclassé* air of a house which has never had its rights respected—a house long accustomed to jangle its dinner-bell in vain

⁴ I use the term 'projection' here in the sense that Laplanche uses it, which differs from how it is commonly understood in psychoanalysis. Laplanche's concept of exponential alterity profoundly alters how projection is conceived. Because the unconscious which projects *is itself* implanted by an external adult other (*der Andere*), all projections harbor, at bottom, an element 'hard as iron' that is irreducibly other ('Ucs.' 114): 'The character of this question is irreducible. It is not a statement, not a delusional belief [...] But a *question* about the other [which] is something that cannot be explained. It is the residue of all explanation' ('Seduction' 174). In other words, all projections, says Laplanche, harbor an allogenic kernel, an *unanswerable question* that opens towards the other: 'at the bottom of projection, there is something that is not projection—that is, a question: what does he want from me? [...] a question not about what I am introducing in the other, but that something comes from the other' (*Drives* 37). Thus the image that Wharton projects onto Nohant in advance of her arrival, like all projections, contains a question about the other. As a result, according to Laplanche, this fantasy she projects has a seam—a weakness, by which it, like all projections, can be split and its contents scattered and dissolved, so that an alternative interpretation can take its place, one that is 'more complete, more comprehensive, less repressive.' See Jean Laplanche's 'Seduction, Persecution, Revelation,' in *Essays on Otherness*. John Fletcher, Ed. London: Routledge, 1997: 166-96. See also Laplanche's 'The Theory of Seduction and the Problem of the Other.' Luke Thurston, Trans. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 78 (1997): 653-666.

and swing its broken hinges unheeded—and instead, one beholds this image of aristocratic well-being, this sober edifice, [...]. (46-7)

For Wharton, ‘Hogarthian pictures of midnight carouses’ are slowly supplanted by the sight of ‘this sober edifice’ which, by the end of her description, has become ‘a shrine’ of ‘household pieties’ (47). Initially drawn to this place and titillated by the socially subversive activities that once transpired within its walls, Wharton ends up revising her image of Nohant quite substantially, as the imagined ‘throng of motley characters’ which so dominated her thoughts upon arrival gradually fades from view, displaced by the quiet, restful vision of an old stately home ‘marked in its very plainness, its conformity’ (47).

Thus what Wharton describes is the experience of confronting a place and having it unsettle one’s expectations, as the image she projected gets dissolved and resolved. Viewed in Laplanchean terms, Wharton initially responds to Nohant by inserting a host of old translations (images derived from books, that is to say—literary fantasies) into the hollow of the enigma that confronts her. However, she remains sufficiently open and available to this other and its potential surprises that her encounter results in a de-translation of those old images, so that new elaborations can take their place. Such a dynamic, as my first chapter argued, lies at the heart of any cognitive process, and it is only via such a procedure that subjective development can occur and cognition transpire. Laplanche explains:

Interpretation [...] *is not a translation but a de-translation*, a dismantling [...] *analytic* interpretation consists in undoing an existing, spontaneous and perhaps symptomatic translation, in order to rediscover [...] and possibly permit a ‘better’ translation; that is to say one that is more complete, more comprehensive and less repressive. (*Translation* 170)

It is this very process that Wharton recounts in rendering her experience at Nohant, and, as a result, Wharton's encounter with George Sand's house shows an individual remaining open throughout an encounter with an other in order that the encounter might effect cognition and knowledge. But what kind of knowledge does Wharton, in the end, possess? Or, perhaps more accurately, what knowledge has taken possession of her? What does this 'better' translation look like? Is it 'more complete, more comprehensive, less repressive'? Taking stock of her experience of Nohant, Wharton writes:

And when, at last, excitedly and enchantedly, one has taken in the quiet perfection of it all, and turned to confront the great question: Does a sight of Nohant deepen the mystery or elucidate it?—one can only answer, in the cautious speech of the New England caustic: *Both*. For if it helps one to understand one side of George Sand's life, it seems actually to cast a thicker obscurity over others. (MF 44)

In other words, the knowledge yielded by her visit does not consist of sweeping conclusions or grand pronouncements about George Sand's life. Rather, Nohant leaves Wharton faced with an enigma, and she, in turn, leaves her own readers 'to confront' the same 'great question' she confronted at Nohant. In the end, Wharton cannot offer a definitive *answer* to the question of Nohant. She can only respond to this 'great question' with a paradox, namely, that the house itself both illuminates and obscures Georges Sand further: 'For if it helps one to understand one side of George Sand's life, it seems actually to cast a thicker obscurity over others' (44). In short, the house and its famed inhabitant remain an enigma, though, and this is crucial, *they are enigmatic in different ways than they were before*. As literary fantasy is refigured by her

encounter with the house, she confronts a question, one she does not answer, but leaves open for her own readers to confront as well. Thus it would seem that Wharton's interpretation of Nohant follows Laplanche's third vicissitude: it is a response to an enigma whose excess is not wholly repressed, but allowed to continue exerting pressure on the interpreter: Laplanche explains this dynamic: 'Something like: "I know very well; and what I don't know, I wish to know nothing of its content; but "all the same", I sense—endlessly—that I don't really know' ('Inspiration' 45).

The following March (1907), the Whartons visited Nohant again, joined this time by Henry James. On this occasion, their visit commences in the graveyard, but Wharton's record of the experience follows a similar pattern. In the grave-yard, they discover that Sand is buried with her husband and children in an arrangement that surprises Wharton:

Feudal even in burial, they are walled off from the village dead, and the tombstone of Maurice Sand [...] bears the name of Dudevant and asserts a claim to the barony. Strange inconsequence of human desires, that the woman who had made her pseudonym illustrious enough to have it assumed by her whole family should cling in death to the obscure name of a repudiated husband; more inconsequent still that the descendant of kings, and the priestess of democracy and Fourierism, should insist on a right to the petty title which was never hers, since it was never Dudevant's to give! On the whole, the gravestones at Nohant are disillusioning [...]. (*MF* 80)

This time, as before, Wharton's expectations are unsettled, as she finds the 'priestess of democracy' clinging to the 'petty title' of 'a repudiated husband' to be 'disillusioning.' Illusions having been dispatched, Wharton moves on to the house itself where, she declares, 'the real meaning of the place must be sought' (80). This seeking commences with the windows, which, Wharton claims, 'lead

straight into the life of George Sand' (80). She then proceeds to take us on a brief tour of the 'big cool dining-room,' but rather than leading us into the life of George Sand, Wharton conjures up images of 'the great woman's illustrious visitors' all seated round the table (81). This gives way to another 'fancy,' as Wharton indulges in more imaginative musing: 'Here, one likes especially to fancy, Maurice Sand exercised his chisel on the famous marionettes for the little theater, while his mother, fitting their costumes with skilful fingers, listened, silent, *comme une bête*, to the dissertations of Fautier, Flaubert, or Dumas' (81). Quickly, it becomes clear that Wharton's tour of Nohant, far from leading straight the life of George Sand, leads to all that surrounds that life, while the core of it, Sand herself, remains elusive. In the end, Wharton admits as much, as her promise of clear vision remains unfulfilled:

It brought one close to that strange unfathomable life, which only at Nohant grows clear, shows bottom, as it were; closer still to be told by the red-brown *bonne* that "Monsieur Maurice" had modeled many of his humorous peasant-types on "*les gens de pays*"; closest of all when she added [...]: "Oh, yes, I remember seeing her at work on them and helping her with it. I was twelve years old when she died."

Here, then, was an actual bit of Nohant tradition, before us in robust and lively middle age: one of the *berrichonnes* whom George Sand loved and celebrated, and who loved and served her in return. For a moment it brought Nohant within touch; yet the final effect of the contact, as one reflected on the vanished enthusiasms and ideals that George Sand's name revives, was the sense that the world of beliefs and ideas has seldom traveled so fast and far as in the years between "Indiana" and to-day. (83-4)

Thus, while her visit brings her 'close to that strange unfathomable life,' in the end, this life remains an enigma. Ultimately, Nohant has the effect of tantalizing and teasing, seeming to promise intimacy, but granting only proximity. Finding out that here, in the form of their tour guide, was 'an actual bit of the Nohant

tradition, before us in robust and lively middle age,' brings the place 'within touch,' but 'the final effect of the contact' was a sense that the distance between herself and Sand is unbridgeable (84). It is a bridge that Wharton cannot cross, nor can she cover over the gap for her readers. For all the incremental proximity ('close,' 'closer' 'closest') she experiences at Nohant, Sand's 'strange unfathomable life' remains an enigma (83). And yet, reading Wharton's experience at Nohant does afford her readers vivid glimpses into Nohant, particularly her detailed description of the puppet theater. This lively and descriptive passage does bring the place 'within touch.' But Wharton is careful, lest her readers mistake this proximity with intimacy. Thus while there are moments when the place 'shows bottom,' the waters remain predominantly murky, and Wharton is quite explicit on this point. In addition, it is surprising to learn that Sand's gravestone bears her married name, and, as a result, if Wharton's readers happen to share some of her illusions, her account of the place refigures readerly expectations as well.

Thus the dominant dynamic of Edith Wharton's experience at Nohant is re-vision, for herself and for her readers. Indeed, this process characterizes both her visits. Her first encounter with the house effectively rewrites the images that she indulges over the breakfast table, replacing fantasy with an elaboration of the place that is equally enigmatic but 'more complete, more comprehensive, less repressive' (Laplanche, *Translation* 170). The second time, her experience is much the same, as Edith Wharton finds it 'disillusioning' to see the 'priestess of democracy' identified on her gravestone as Baroness Dudevant (*MF* 80). Just as previously her images are re-written, this time her illusion is dismissed,

displaced, revised. As before, the 'final effect of the contact' with Nohant is to reinforce the degree to which the gap between Wharton's own life and George Sand's is unbridgeable. It is a distance she cannot span, as writer and house remain enigmatic to her, though perhaps in different ways than before her visits.

Whereas her first visit to Nohant was preceded by vivid speculations over the breakfast table, Wharton arrives in Amiens in the dark. Arriving at night has, for Wharton, the liberating advantage of erasure:

There is no conjectural first impression to be modified, perhaps got rid of: one's mind presents a blank page for the town to write its name on.

At Amiens the autograph consists of one big word: the cathedral. Other, fainter writing may come out when one has leisure to seek for it; but the predominance of those mighty characters leaves, at first, no time to read between the lines. (7-8)

From the outset, Wharton figures her encounter with Amiens as an act of reading, but one in which the positions of interpreter and interpretant have been inverted. The travel writer, or interpreter (the one translating this experience into language to her own readers), is the 'blank page,' while the town is the one inscribing its name on the mind of the writer. And, in this instance, what is written 'consists of one big word: the cathedral' whose 'mighty characters' impinge with such force that Wharton is left with little time to 'read between the lines.' Here the cathedral is quite explicitly a sign that Wharton must read, but this activity begins with passivity, as the cathedral places its reader (Wharton) in the position of recipient.

In other words, the initial impact of the experience, its primary vector, is centripetal, for the cathedral exerts its gravitational pull so strongly on the perceiving subject that she is drawn into orbit around it, becoming a recipient of

the cathedral's message. Standing 'in a sharp shower, under a *notaire*'s doorway, and looking across the little square at the west front of Amiens,' she is open to the message of the other, not the Lacanian Big Other, but the concrete other that stands before her in this particular moment—the cathedral at Amiens, 'the one big word' which inscribes its 'mighty characters' on the 'blank page' of her mind.⁵

And yet, how 'blank' is this page? Does Wharton truly come to encounter the cathedral with no preconceptions whatsoever? Pausing before the western façade, she proceeds to attempt a reading of its 'mighty characters.' In doing so, she proceeds by asking questions. But these questions are informed by voices other than her own. Specifically, these questions are shaped by other critical interpretations of the cathedral that she has read in advance of her visit. Thus her questions are not only responses to the 'mighty' monument that confronts her. They are also responses, in part, to art critics whose writings she has read. Once again, as in many of the critical articles discussed in the previous chapter,

⁵ For a Lacanian approach to Wharton's travel writing, see Shirley Foster's 'Making it Her Own: Edith Wharton's Europe' in *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe*, Katherine Joslin and Alan Price, Eds. New York: Peter Lang, 1993. Foster claims that, for Wharton, Europe is 'the desired Other,' which leads Wharton to adopt two different strategies in her travel writing. One approach casts Europe as 'the ideal world into which she can discover and maker [sic] her own by abandoning herself to its seductive influence' (Foster 130). The other approach casts Europe as 'the intransigent not-self, which must be actively claimed by strategies of insertion and assertiveness and which must be persuaded, even forced, to yield up its secrets' (130). Foster's notion that Wharton is constantly shifting and realigning her stance towards what she encounters on her travels is certainly consonant with my own argument, though I would tend to view Wharton's stance as incorporating multiple viewpoints, as opposed to a shuttling back and forth from two binary, and opposing, positions. Additionally, while Foster often sees Wharton's passivity and activity as opposing forces, I would suggest they are complementary, both positions serving the same end—an attempt to respond to and interpret an enigma.

she is engaging in a multi-voiced conversation, responding to what others have said as well as to the work-of-art that stands before her:⁶

Is the stage too crowded? Is there a certain sameness in the overarching tiers of the stone hierarchy, each figure set in precise alignment with its neighbours, each drapery drawn within the same perpendicular bounds? Yes, perhaps—if one remembers Rheims and Bourges, but if, setting aside such kindred associations, one surrenders one's self uncritically to the total impression produced, if one lets the fortunate accidents of time and weather count for their full value in that total—[...] if one views the thing, in short, partly as a symbol and partly as a 'work of nature' (which all ancient monuments by grace of time become), then the front of Amiens is surely one of the most splendid spectacles that Gothic art can show. (8-9)

These are the kinds of questions an art historian might pose. In fact, Sarah Bird Wright uses the term 'connoisseur' (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the word) to describe Wharton's relationship to art she encounters on her travels.⁷ And yet, although while the initial questions Wharton poses when confronted with the façade of Amiens Cathedral are clearly influenced by other critical interpretations, the tone, form, and substance of her response differ quite markedly from that of 'the specialist' (MF 177). In fact, Wharton declares that the cathedral ought to be approached 'uncritically' (9). But before discussing what she means by this term, let us pause for a moment to examine the course her thoughts follow, tracing the shape of her initial response to the cathedral.

⁶ Sarah Bird Wright has noted the degree to which Wharton's travel writing was both influenced by John Ruskin's work and is simultaneously arguing against some of his principles. Wright remarks that such an approach 'is an excellent way to deal with what Harold Bloom calls "the anxiety of influence"' (Wright 10). She does not elaborate on this point, but implicit in her observation is the notion that Wharton's travel writings were often responses to other art critics—a view clearly in line with my own.

⁷ For more on this definition of a 'connoisseur' and on Ruskin's influence on Wharton's approach to visual art, see Sarah Bird Wright's *Edith Wharton's Travel Writing: The Making of a Connoisseur*, New York: St. Martin's, 1997, pp. 2-5 & 10-11.

As has already been noted, but bears repeating, the initial impact of the experience is centripetal. Her first glimpse of Amiens Cathedral thrusts Wharton into the position of passive recipient whose 'blank' mind is being inscribed with the cathedral's 'mighty characters.' But, inevitably and rather quickly, the opinions of certain art critics (that the façade is crowded, that the sculpture is repetitive) re-assert themselves. So Wharton's mind does not remain 'blank' for long. Rather, the encounter is immediately impinged upon by the voices of art critics who have interpreted the monument and whose interpretations Wharton has read. These voices, much like the imaginative fantasies entertained over breakfast before her trip to Nohant, are quick to impinge on Wharton's encounter with the cathedral, directing the course of her thoughts ('Is the stage too crowded? Is there a certain sameness in the overarching tiers[...]?'). In other words, what begins as a 'centripetal' dynamic quickly gives way to more 'centrifugal' temptations, as all manner of 'ready-made' axioms and pre-fabricated interpretations re-assert themselves. How easy it would be to place one of them into the hollow of the enigma that confronts her, Wharton readily admits: 'On the *symbolic* side especially, *it would be tempting to linger*' (9, italics mine). But rather than lapse into a 'tempting' gesture of 'Ptolemaic' closure, she offers an incisive critique of such an approach.

Such an approach, Wharton claims, is limiting, for it constitutes an 'order of mind' that 'sees in past expressions of faith [...] only the bonds cast off by the spirit of man in its long invincible struggle for "more light"' (9). In other words, because the cathedral is a symbol of faith, reading it symbolically—to the

exclusion of all other considerations—would be an act of narcissistic re-centering. Read as an ‘expression of faith’ whose ‘bonds’ the modern traveler has ‘cast off,’ the cathedral becomes nothing more than a ‘sign’ that valorizes the identity of the observer. Such a procedure turns the cathedral into a reification of the identity of the viewer by embodying his opposite, transformed solely into a symbol of what he is *not* to the exclusion of all else. In such an instance, interpretation becomes a gesture of ‘Ptolemaic’ re-centering, a way to valorize one’s own beliefs and identity as an enlightened individual by casting the cathedral as a sign of one’s polar opposite and nothing more. To read the cathedral in such a way transforms it in a ‘reassuring closed retreat [...] a recognition scheme, familiar, snug, canny’ (Felman, ‘Phallacy’ 10).

Again, Wharton not only resists such a procedure, but explicitly argues against it. In fact, not only does she argue against it, she proposes an alternative. This alternative stance involves viewing the cathedral *partly* as a symbol and *partly* as a “‘work of nature’” and concedes that it would be ‘tempting to linger’ on the symbolic and forget the latter. Thus while initially the cathedral is figured as a text (‘an autograph [...] one big word’), it quickly becomes much more than that, something that is also a “‘work of nature’.” But in order to see it in such a manner requires viewing it ‘uncritically.’ Adopting such a stance, however, does not mean viewing the cathedral without any reference to other monuments or without any knowledge of art or history. Wharton is not advocating ignorance.⁸ Rather, to view something ‘uncritically’ involves

⁸ She does, however, admit elsewhere that ‘ignorance is not without its aesthetic uses’ though these ‘uses’ turn out to be fairly limited. See *MF* pp. 31-2.

‘setting aside such kindred associations’ in order to ‘surrender[s] one’s self uncritically to the total impression produced’ (*MF* 9). In other words, knowledge of art and history is not to be banished or foreclosed, but simply *set aside* so that it might be unsettled and refashioned by the act of surrendering to the ‘total impression’ produced by the cathedral itself. Wharton describes this alternative approach in detail:

the other—the more complex—point of view, in which enfranchisement of thought exists in harmony with the atavism of feeling, [...] permits one to appreciate these archeological values to the full, yet subordinates them to the more impressive facts of which they are the immense and moving expression. To such minds, the rousing of a sense of reverence is the supreme gift of these mighty records of mediaeval life: reverence for the persistent, slow-moving, far-reaching forces that brought them forth. (10)

Here other critics’ voices (those interpretations she has read before encountering the cathedral itself) are rendered ‘subordinate’ to the experience of the cathedral itself in order that something else—‘a sense of reverence’—might take their place.

Thus, much as her experience of Nohant displaced the images that preceded her visit, here she advocates adopting a certain stance in order that the ‘mighty characters’ of the cathedral itself might revise the critical opinions that she inserts into the hollow of the cathedral’s enigma. The ‘archeological values’ that these critics extol are not absent, they are simply ‘subordinate’—that is to say, forced into the background in order to play a lesser role. Indeed, ‘the more complex’ point of view that Wharton advocates actually involves dispersion or multiplicity. It involves allowing two currents—‘enfranchisement of thought’ and ‘atavism of feeling’—to run side-by-side, converging to create a response to

the 'total impression' of the cathedral. In other words, 'thought' and 'feeling' are equally important, if the thing itself, the cathedral, is to avoid being consumed by what it signifies (the faith of its builders). Thus Wharton is quite explicitly arguing against an interpretive procedure that reduces the cathedral to nothing more than a symbol, that reads it solely as 'a page of history' and a 'sign of those past limitations.' To bind this 'one big word: the cathedral' to a proper signified (the faith of its builders) is an act Wharton admits is tempting, but ultimately reductive (*MF* 7). Not only does such an approach reduce the cathedral to nothing but 'a page in history' (a flat surface in which to recognize oneself), it also reduces the individuals who built the cathedral to inferior, unenlightened beings.

For Wharton, the builders of Amiens were not ignorant exotic others with whom she, and her enlightened contemporaries, have little in common. Rather, she 'cherishes every sign of those past limitations that were, after all, each in its turn, symbols of the same effort toward a clearer vision' that she and her contemporaries strive to achieve (10). Here, Wharton makes a complex and interesting point: what initially seems a 'sign' of an inferior frame of mind—a society trapped by religious and political 'bonds' that modernity has subsequently 'cast off'—is, for Wharton, a 'symbol' of 'the same effort toward clearer vision' that subsequent generations have also strived to achieve. Thus the medieval builders are not ignorant peasants emerging from the Dark Ages, whose shadowy ignorance serves to highlight Wharton's own enlightened perspective. Rather, the medieval builders of Amiens were people engaged in

‘the same effort towards clearer vision’ as modern individuals such as herself claim to be.

But is such a claim a problematic act of what Megan Boler calls ‘consumptive identification’ and what Shoshana Felman might label ‘acknowledgement’? Does Wharton resist turning into a reflection of self, only to domesticate the enigma in the cathedral in other ways? No. As with Nohant, Amiens Cathedral remains an enigma to Wharton, one to which she can surrender, but whose message she cannot fully integrate. It is an other that provokes, addresses, and interpellates her, its message one she can contemplate, but not fully assimilate:

A Gothic cathedral sums up so much of history, it has cost so much in faith and toil, in blood and folly and saintly abnegation, it has sheltered such a long succession of lives, given collective voice to so many inarticulate and contradictory cravings, seen so much that was sublime and terrible, or foolish, pitiful and grotesque, that it is like some mysteriously preserved ancestor of the human race, [...] grown sedentary and throned in stony contemplation, before whom the fleeting generations come and go. (10-11)

The longer Wharton stands ‘under a *notaire*’s doorway, looking across the little square at the west front of Amiens,’ the farther her thoughts get from the art critics, and the more consumed she is with the spectacle of that which stands before her. As her response unfolds, the voices of art critics are quickly drowned out by ‘“the surge and thunder”’ of the façade. Indeed, as her response proceeds, the cathedral begins to take on a life of its own, becoming a subject in its own right. According to Wharton, it is an active entity that provides shelter, gives ‘collective voice to so many inarticulate and contradictory cravings,’ witnesses generation after generation of human folly, and, finally, occupies an

elevated position, 'throned in stony contemplation' above the 'fleeting generations' who scuttle before its façade.

This passage spirals back to where her encounter began, to a space where the observer, traveler, or interpreter is *opened to and by* the centripetal vector of the other. In figuring the cathedral as a subject in its own right, not an object of observation, Wharton spirals back into a state of receptivity, a space in which she is acted on by the cathedral, as in the first moment of their interaction, when her mind became a 'blank page' on which the building wrote its 'mighty characters' (MF 7). Here, it is the cathedral who contemplates Wharton, a member of the 'fleeting generations who come and go.' In the above-quoted passage, the cathedral is figured as possessing mysterious, esoteric knowledge, as having 'seen so much that was sublime and terrible, or foolish, pitiful and grotesque.' In other words, for Wharton, the cathedral is a *sujet supposé savoir*, a subject presumed to know. According to Laplanche, the moment an individual is in the presence of a *sujet supposé savoir*, transference has been installed, which means that the experience has the potential to effect cognition and knowledge.⁹

But, for Wharton, it is not quite that simple either. The cathedral's position is not only that of 'subject presumed to know,' but also that of a helpless infant—insofar as it is fundamentally passive in the face of 'accidents of time and weather' (9). According to Wharton, these 'accidents' have bestowed on its facade 'the richest *patina* that northern stone can acquire' (9).

⁹ For a detailed explanation, see Jean Laplanche's 'Transference: its Provocation by the Analyst' in *Essays on Otherness*. Ed. John Fletcher. London: Routledge, 1999: 214-233.

For Wharton, weather and time are acts of ‘grace,’ since they transform the cathedral into a “‘work of nature’”—thereby transforming it to something *in excess* of its symbolic function (10). To read symbolically, then, would be to foreclose this excess.¹⁰

Thus, according to Wharton, Amiens Cathedral is worked on *by* nature in a way even its builders could not have anticipated, thereby transforming the edifice in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways, ways its creators could never have foreseen (9). As such, the cathedral takes on meanings *in excess* of those that its original creators intended; it is a ‘sign’ of far more than simply the faith of the medieval minds that conceived it and the peasant hands that built it. In other words, because of its helpless position in the face of ‘accidents of time and weather,’ the cathedral becomes, inevitably, a sign of *more* than what it was meant to signify. As a result, one who reads it solely as a ‘symbol’ and ‘a page of history’ forecloses this excess of significance that ‘the accidents of time and nature’ have bestowed. It is for this reason that Wharton believes one must ‘surrender[s] one’s self uncritically to the total impression produced’ and not simply read its symbolism (*MF* 9).

In short, Amiens Cathedral, like Wharton herself as she stands before its façade, is both an active subject and a passive recipient. Indeed, both processes appear to be transpiring if not simultaneously, then certainly in such close proximity as to be untraceable and, in effect, indistinguishable. The cathedral

¹⁰ Such an outlook takes on a particular weight and poignancy when Wharton describes Rheims Cathedral after it has been bombed during the war. As it happens, the ‘accidents of time’ prove to be far more destructive, and these monuments even more helpless, than Wharton could have envisioned. Wharton’s wartime response to Rheims Cathedral is discussed below.

acts upon observers like Wharton (contemplating them and inscribing its 'mighty characters' on them), while also being acted upon by 'accidents of time and weather' (9). Likewise, Wharton herself is both passive ('a blank page') and an active interpreter (one who must attempt to read the 'mighty characters'), recipient and agent. She is a traveler who must surrender to its message in order to read the cathedral in an appropriate manner. Thus Wharton figures interpreter and interpretant as two subjects engaged in a kind of intercourse or exchange. Cathedral and traveler are participants in a conversation, both active and passive, each in their turn, both acting and receiving, reading and being read. Just as Wharton remains open to the cathedral's 'total impression,' so too, the cathedral remains vulnerable to forces (time and weather) larger than itself.¹¹ Indeed, it is this sense of something larger than one's self that seems to stir and provoke

Wharton:

Yes—reverence is the most precious emotion that such a building inspires: reverence for the accumulated experiences of the past, readiness to puzzle out their meaning, unwillingness to disturb rashly results so powerfully willed, so laboriously arrived at—the desire, in short, to keep intact as many links as possible between yesterday and to-morrow, to lose, in the ardour of new experiment, the least that may be of the long rich heritage of human experience. This, at any rate, might seem to be the cathedral's word to the traveler from a land which has undertaken to get on

¹¹ The parallels between such a dynamic and the primal situation, as Laplanche sees it, are clear. Just as the infant is confronted with the enigmatic messages that contain 'more' than the adult other who sends them knows or intends, so, too, does the cathedral contain 'more' than its builders intend. Likewise, just as the infantile situation is 'essentially passive' that passivity is quickly overturned by efforts at binding the enigmatic messages that confront the infant (Laplanche, 'Masochism' 212). Indeed, according to Laplanche, 'Confronting the essential passivity of the infantile situation is the major task of symbolisation' (212). The point of drawing these parallels between Wharton's cultural encounter and Laplanche's conception of the primal scene is simply to emphasize that this is the reason such encounters have the potential to effect cognition and knowledge in the receiving subject (in this instance, Wharton herself). Laplanche's ideas on passivity and activity and the degree to which he unsettles this binary are explored at length in Elizabeth Cowie's 'The Seductive Theories of Jean Laplanche: the drive, passivity and femininity' in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, and the Drives*, London: ICA, 1992, pp. 121-136. See also Jean Laplanche's 'Masochism and the General Theory of Seduction,' pp. 197-213.

without the past, or to regard it only as a 'feature' of aesthetic interest, a sight to which one travels rather than a light by which one lives. (11)

This passage has been cited as evidence of Wharton's uncritical devotion to the past and her tendency to valorize tradition for tradition's sake (Vita-Finzi 9). But this passage could just as easily be read as a paean to alterity, a plea to respect the differences of our enigmatic ancestors whose creations continue to address and interpellate us and whose meaning can never be entirely clear to succeeding generations. Nor is this meaning ever completely fixed, since the cathedral will appear differently to succeeding generations, as time and weather continue their work—work that no single individual or society can ever completely control, as the fate of Rheims Cathedral during the First World War attests. Such a reading makes a great deal of sense when this passage is considered in the larger context of her overall response to Amiens, which proposes viewing the cathedral 'uncritically'—that is to say, adopting a stance that involves 'setting aside such kindred associations' in order to allow the cathedral to revise them (*MF* 9). In addition, it is worth noting that her discussion of 'reverence' involves a fair amount of contingency. She acknowledges that reverence '*might seem* to be the cathedral's word to the traveler from a land which has undertaken to get on without a past' (11, italics mine). Wharton states quite clearly that this is what she, as an American traveler (for this visit was made and the article written before her final expatriation to France in 1910), hears the cathedral saying. Wharton is quite clear about the fact that 'reverence' is not necessarily what every traveler will hear, but that the

‘west front of Amiens says this word with a quite particular emphasis’ to *her*, a traveler from ‘a land that has undertaken to get on without a past’ (11).

In addition, although she declares ‘reverence’ to be ‘the most precious emotion’ that the cathedral ‘inspires,’ it is not the only one. The pages that follow her encounter with the façade are devoted to celebrating the ‘charming, childish insistence on irrelevant episode and detail’ that she finds inside the cathedral. Indeed, her response to the cathedral’s interior focuses on its ‘anecdotic’ nature, the ‘fairy-tale calling off one’s attention into innumerable little by-paths,’ and Wharton allows her own attention to be called off in such a manner. Indulging in such ‘delighted investigation,’ she wonders ‘exactly what Herod’s white woolly dog was about while Salome was dancing away the Baptist’s head’ (12; 13). Indeed, Wharton delights in the ‘anecdotic’ charm of the interior as much as she does in the grandeur of the façade (12). Thus, viewed in its entirety, her response to Amiens Cathedral is hardly a simple exhortation to revere the past. Rather, it is a sophisticated response to a work-of-art that attempts to reach some level of cognition of this enigmatic other without reducing it to a reflection of self. Wharton attempts this feat by adopting a particular interpretive stance, one she takes pains to explain and defend. It is a stance that involves being both a passive recipient and an active reader simultaneously, approaching the work-of-art as a subject in its own right. It entails responding to an entity that has accumulated meanings in excess of what its creators intended via an interpretive procedure that involves both passivity and activity. In addition, the interpretive stance she advocates and adopts requires emotion and thought to play equal parts in shaping her response, a

response that can only commence after one has 'surrender[ed] one's self uncritically to the total impression produced' (9).

Wharton's response to Bourges Cathedral follows a similar course. Her encounter begins with 'a long dash across country,' but activity soon gives way to passivity, as the cathedral rises 'throned [...] in proud isolation above the plain' (69). Here, as at Amiens, nature acts upon the cathedral, helping 'by an opportune rise in the ground, to lift the cathedral to its singular eminence' (70). And just as her encounter with Amiens Cathedral began with erasure (her mind a 'blank page'), Wharton's 'first sight of the cathedral' at Bourges has an 'overwhelming and not quite explicable effect' (70). The initial effect, in short, is a loss of words, an inability for our interpreter to explain what she sees. Even though this is her second visit, Wharton still experiences 'the same difficulty in running it down, in differentiating it from the richer yet perhaps less deeply Gothic impression produced by the rival churches of the north' (70). But although initially 'inexplicable,' an attempt at explication soon follows:

For, begin as one will by admitting, by insisting upon, the defects of Bourges—its irregular inharmonious façade, its thin piers, its mean outer aisles—one yet ends in a state where criticism perforce yields to sensation, where one surrenders one's self wholly to the spell of its spiritual suggestion. Certainly, it would be hard to put a finger, either within or without, on the specific tangible cause of this feeling. Is it to be found in the extraordinary beauty of the five western portals, so crowded with noble and pathetic imagery and delicate ornamental detail? But the doors of Chartres surpass even these! Is it then [...] the rich blue and red of its dense ancient glass? But Chartres, again, has finer glass of that matched period. Is it the long clear sweep of the nave and aisles, uninterrupted by the cross-lines of transept or chancel-screen? But if one recalls the wonderful convolutions of the ambulatory of Canterbury, one has to confess that Gothic art [...] has created curves of greater poetry and mystery [...]. (70-1)

As at Amiens, the initial moment of passive receptivity soon gives way to an active attempt to read the cathedral. As at Amiens, Wharton's initial attempt is marked by a critical impulse, which quickly pipes up with a dry, concise list of the cathedral's 'defects' ('its irregular inharmonious façade, its thin piers, its mean outer aisles'). Yet 'criticism perforce yields to sensation,' as Wharton reverts again to a state of receptivity, 'surrender[ing] [...] wholly to the spell of its spiritual suggestion.' But the critical faculty soon reasserts itself, as she attempts to analyze this 'spell of its spiritual suggestion,' trying 'to put a finger [...] on the tangible cause of this feeling.' She proceeds in this investigation by asking questions: Is it the portals? No. Is it the glass? No. The nave, then? No, again.

What unfolds in this series of questions and answers is a dialogue within an observer who is other within herself. Here, Wharton is both an incisive critic who can spot all the architectural 'flaws' *and* a lover, someone able and willing to remain blind to these failings in order to surrender to the experience. As a result, her response includes both the technical observations of an art historian, as well as the more mystical, lyric ruminations characteristic of a believer, though perhaps not in God so much as in Art. Quoting Saint Theresa, Wharton likens her experience at Bourges to 'a delicious ointment' being 'poured into the soul like an exquisite perfume' (72).

Thus, by incorporating both concise critical observations as well as more mystical, lyric sentiments into her response, Wharton is displaying the very sort of multiplicity she advocates in her response to Amiens, as 'enfranchisement of thought' engages in a vivid dialogue with 'the atavism of feeling' (10). In

seeking the 'cause' of this 'sensation,' Wharton examines Bourges Cathedral with a critical eye, as the technical language of her phrasing suggests ('Is it the long clear sweep of the nave and aisles, uninterrupted by the cross-lines of transept or chancel-screen?' (71). Her responses to these questions are precisely the sort of answers an art critic might offer, as she deploys a comparative critical mechanism that attempts to measure Bourges against its 'rival churches to the North' (70). Such a gesture implicitly classifies the cathedral according to the formal elements that comprise the Gothic style. Through this exchange, which is ultimately fruitless insofar as it does not explain the enigmatic 'spell of Bourges,' Wharton illustrates the limits of comparative criticism—that is to say, the limits of seeing a work-of-art only in terms of its aesthetic style (in this case, gothic) and that style's accompanying formal characteristics. Through this interrogative procedure (a dialogue that transpires within a self that is plural), she dramatizes the limits of critical classification, for each time she tries to link her experience of Bourges to a formal element of the gothic style, an answer eludes her. Implicit in such a discourse is the claim that viewing the cathedral in such comparative and formalized aesthetic terms causes one to miss the cathedral's greatest achievement, its ineffable distillation of 'that breath of mystical devotion which issues from the very heart of Mediaeval Christianity [...] that other less expressible side of the great ruling influence of the Middle Ages' (71-2).

In a sense, Wharton illustrates that while the cathedral is gothic, it is also something other than this, something *more* than simply a sign of faith or a collection of formal characteristics that comprise the gothic style. Like Amiens,

it cannot simply be bound, unproblematically, to this signifier, for to do so would mean dismissing this building as inferior, which is something her own deeply moving experience belies. In her concluding sentence, Wharton remarks upon the quality of otherness she encounters at Bourges: 'here, at Bourges, one feels that other, less expressible side of the great ruling influence of the Middle Ages' (72). In short, Bourges, like Amiens, is other within itself, and, as a result, it is a subject in its own right, similar to Wharton herself, for she, too, insofar as she has an unconscious, is other unto her self. Laplanche explains: 'there is the primordial split, which means quite simply that *the other is other*, but with this paradox or amphibology: he is other than me because he is other than himself' (Trans.' 220-1). As a result, the enigmatic address of the cathedral initiates an elliptical, spiraling movement marked by an 'essential dissymmetry' (228)—a movement that propels the one who receives this enigmatic message 'back along the threads of the 'other' [...] with, as horizon, the other thing in the other person, that is, the unconscious of the other, which makes these messages enigmatic' ('Time' 258).

Wharton's response to Bourges reinscribes her own readers in this spiraling dynamic, as she moves through the very process Laplanche outlines above—a process crucial to cognition of the other and subjective development. Her experience forces her to engage both with the external other and with the other within her self. Indeed, it is her own subjective multiplicity that allows her to respond with *both* thought and feeling, as a critic and as a lover or believer, to the external and engage with that which is other within the external other—that is to say, to engage with that which resides in the cathedral that is in excess of its

‘gothic’ style: ‘that other, less expressible side of the Middle Ages’ which is also contained in Bourges Cathedral. Thus, as at Amiens, Wharton’s experience in Bourges is another instance of her response to a work-of-art following a predominantly ‘Copernican’ procedure, one that allows her to remain opened to and by the other who surprises her, a spiraling dynamic in which she reinscribes her own readers.

The vacillation between ‘thought’ and ‘feeling,’ that dynamic spiraling that allows Wharton to remain open to the enigma of Bourges Cathedral, also characterizes her response at Rheims, though this time, these two modalities (‘thought’ and ‘feeling’) are far from distinct. In fact, when confronting Rheims Cathedral, Wharton uses slightly different terms, opting instead for a debate over the respective merits of ‘the sentimental’ versus ‘the technical.’ Yet, as will soon become apparent, this binary is far from fixed or stable:

There are two ways of feeling those arts—such as sculpture, painting and architecture—which appeal first to the eye; the technical, and what must perhaps be called the sentimental way. [...] There is hardly a way of controverting the axiom that thought and its formulation are indivisible, or the deduction that, therefore, the only critic capable of appreciating the beauty of a great work of architecture is he who can resolve it into its component parts, understand the relation they bear to each other, and not only reconstruct them mentally, but conceive of them in a different relation, and visualize the total result of such modifications.

Assuredly—yet in those arts that lie between the bounds of thought and sense, and leaning distinctly towards the latter, is there not room for another, a lesser yet legitimate order of appreciation—for the kind of confused atavistic enjoyment that is made up of historical association, of a sense of mass and harmony, of the relation of the building to the sky above it, to the lights and shadows it creates about it—deeper than all, of a blind sense in the blood of its old racial power, the things it meant to far-off minds of which ours are the oft-dissolved and reconstituted fragments? (*MF* 177-8)

This passage illustrates a characteristic oscillation in Wharton's critical writings, one that I have discussed at length in relation to Amiens and Bourges and that several scholars have also noted and identified. Penelope Vita-Finzi observes that 'she tends to fall between the two stools of dogmatic assertion and vague speculation' (2). According to Laplanche, the position of a critic is ineluctably one of being 'caught between two stools' ('Transference' 224). Does Wharton fall between these two stools? Or is she light enough on her feet that she manages to shuttle, deftly and productively, between them? Perhaps Wharton's oscillation between 'the technical' and 'the sentimental' is an attempt to grapple with the dilemma that lies at the very heart of any interpretive act. Frederick Wegener makes this very claim: "Form" and "function," technique and inspiration, "art" and "feeling"—the poles between which Wharton constantly oscillated as a critic throughout her career could not be more familiar, or even commonplace, to the historian of criticism' (Introduction 30). Wegener goes on to assert that 'those tensions remain fruitfully unresolved' in Wharton's work (31). I would agree and go one step further by suggesting that not only do these 'tensions' remain 'fruitfully unresolved,' but that they constitute an interpretive stance that follows Laplanche's 'third vicissitude' and which can be seen as an early example of 'Copernican' criticism—responses to texts that achieve some measure of critical closure while still remaining open, that is to say, 'available to the other who comes to surprise' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 47).

That said, one can locate a certain degree of what Vita-Finzi calls 'dogmatic assertion' and 'vague speculation' in her response to Rheims Cathedral. Wharton invokes the 'axiom' that 'thought and its formulation are

indivisible.’ What can be more dogmatic than asserting an incontrovertible axiom? But is Wharton’s critical response to Rheims Cathedral as inflexible as her use of the word ‘axiom’ initially suggests? Perhaps what Wharton is engaging in here is not so much an assertion of critical principles as an exploration of their limits. After asserting this ‘axiom,’ Wharton then deduces:

[...] therefore, the only critic capable of appreciating the beauty of a great work of architecture is he who can resolve it into its component parts, understand the relation they bear to each other, and not only reconstruct them mentally, but conceive of them in a different relation, and visualize the total result of such modifications. (MF 178)

Having asserted that this ‘deduction’ is incontrovertible, she then proceeds to do just that: ‘yet in those arts that lie between the bounds of thought and sense, and leaning distinctly towards the latter, *is there not room for another, a lesser yet legitimate order of appreciation* [...]?’ (italics mine). She offers an ‘axiom,’ deducts something from it, then *questions*, literally, how incontrovertible that deduction actually is. Careful attention to Wharton’s choice of words is revealing: ‘there is *hardly a way* of controverting the axiom’ (italics mine). There is, however, *a way* nonetheless—a crack into which Wharton slips the question ‘is there not room for *another*, a lesser yet legitimate order of appreciation [...]?’

Thus, for Wharton, responses to a work-of-art can follow more than one path. While Laplanche traces three possible vicissitudes for interpretation, Wharton sees two. There is the ‘way’ of mastery, or, to use Wharton’s term ‘the specialist,’ but there is also ‘another’ way, that of ‘the man,’ the human being ‘who measures the beauty of a cathedral not by its structural detail consciously

analyzed, but by its total effect in indirectly stimulating his sensations' (177). Wharton freely admits that the latter, the one who responds via sensation alone, 'is classed—and who shall say unjustly?—as no better than the reader who should pretend to rejoice in the music of Lycidas without understanding the meaning of its words' (177). But interestingly, Wharton is not herself classifying such responses this way. She casts this assertion in the passive voice: the one who responds via sensation alone 'is classed,' but by whom? The previous paragraph would suggest that the specialist himself performs such classification: 'The specialist does not recognize the validity of the latter [sentimental] criterion' (177). The specialist might not recognize the validity of such responses, but Wharton herself, having given a respectful nod to the specialist, does recognize its validity. Granted, she includes the rhetorical question 'and who shall say unjustly?,' but she does not actually refuse to 'recognize the validity' of the sentimental response—quite the opposite, in fact, since the paragraphs that follow argue (somewhat strenuously) for the 'legitimacy' of this kind of response. In short, Wharton asks the question 'Who shall say unjustly?,' a question which initially seems rhetorical, but that, in the end, is not, for she proceeds to respond to this question by arguing for the 'legitimacy' of the sentimental. 'Who shall say unjustly?' Wharton herself, as it turns out.¹²

Wharton takes care to define what she means by 'the sentimental' and 'the technical,' and her definitions are far from 'dogmatic' or 'vague.'

¹² It seems worth remarking that here, once again, Wharton employs multiple voices, various rhetorical positions, and a predominantly interrogative stance.

According to Wharton, the ‘specialist’ is one who ‘can resolve it [a building] into its component parts, understand the relation they bear to each other, and not only reconstruct them mentally, but conceive of them in a different relation, and visualize the total result of such modifications’ (178). This is far from a dry, dogmatic exercise of intellect alone. Indeed, Wharton introduces her discussion of the ‘technical’ versus the ‘sentimental’ response by declaring that ‘[t]here are two ways of *feeling* those arts—such as sculpture, painting and architecture—that first appeal to the eye’ (177; italics mine). Even the specialist is meant to be ‘feeling’ the work-of-art, not simply analyzing it. Any critical response, whether technical or sentimental, is for Wharton inherently emotional. In addition, the ‘specialist’ must also respond with his intellect and his imagination.¹³ He must discern a work’s ‘component parts’ and ‘understand’ their relation to one another, then imagine how they might have been put together differently in order, presumably (though Wharton does not say so explicitly), to assess whether the arrangement is the most successful one possible.

Likewise, the ‘sentimental’ response is not exclusively sensory or emotional. Rather, it ‘*measures* the beauty of a cathedral not by its structural detail consciously analyzed, but by its total effect in indirectly stimulating an on-looker’s sensations, in setting up a movement of associated *ideas*’ (italics mine). In other words, Wharton is not defending some vague, inarticulate, affect-based

¹³ Following Wharton, I have adopted the masculine pronoun, which Wharton always does when referring to a critic. Frederick Wegener’s introduction to *The Uncollected Critical Writings* traces the gendered way Wharton conceives of the critical act as masculine, concluding that ‘this is a woman who obviously found it difficult to take women seriously as writers of criticism’ (11).

response entirely bereft of intellect or reason—quite the opposite, since ‘the sentimental’ involves measurement and ‘ideas.’ For Wharton, sensual stimulation is not even primary, but something that occurs ‘indirectly.’ She goes on to claim that the ‘sentimental’ response, this ‘lesser yet legitimate form of appreciation,’ also involves an ‘atavistic enjoyment that is made up of historical association, of a sense of mass and harmony, of the relation of the building to the sky above it, to the lights and shadows it creates’ (178). But that is not all. In addition to sensation, some knowledge of history and an ability to see relationships between the building and its surroundings is required. In other words, the ‘sentimental’ response involves an ability to contextualize. But this ‘context’ is not simply an act of the intellect. It also involves a more instinctual, empathetic impulse: ‘a blind sense’ of ‘the things it meant to far-off minds of which ours are the oft-dissolved and reconstituted fragments’ (178). In other words, it involves imagination—an attempt must be made to bridge the gap between the present and the past, between the individual who stands before the cathedral now and those who once worshipped there and placed stone upon stone to build it. Wharton’s ‘sentimental’ response, in short, involves the difficult empathetic task of trying to bridge the gap between self and other:

Such enjoyment, to be of any value to the mind that feels it, must be based on an approximate acquaintance with the conditions producing the building, the structural theories that led up to it, their meaning, their evolution, their relation to the moral and mental growth of the builders [...] (178-9)

Interestingly, Wharton believes that the ‘sentimental’ response involves a ‘a mind that feels,’ and this feeling (which resides in the mind) springs from ‘an

approximate acquaintance' with the past, with history and with the specific nexus of relations that were involved in creating a cathedral. Yet she is not advocating an interpretive approach that would today be classed as 'new historicism' (or some faint shadow of Boler's 'testimonial reading' that simply traces the various socio-political relations that traverse a work-of-art). Wharton's 'sentimental' response involves using one's knowledge of historical context as a springboard for a making a larger imaginative and empathetic leap into the past—an attempt, however partial and imperfect, to forge links between the 'far-off minds' of the cathedral's 'builders' and our own, which, Wharton believes, contain 'oft-dissolved and reconstituted fragments' of those who have come before us.

Whatever the short-comings of this view of humanity and its unexamined universalist assumptions, Wharton's notion of 'the sentimental' is hardly straight-forward. It is an active process of critical appreciation that involves the senses, the intellect, and the imagination—a 'mind' that 'feels.' What Wharton describes, in effect, is a process of critical appreciation where gaps of knowledge are bridged by imaginative effort, which is inspired and fed by the sensual stimulation that the work-of-art provokes. What she defends here as 'legitimate' is not a set of principles to apply when approaching a work-of-art, but rather a *procedure*, an interpretive approach that relies on intellect, emotion,

imagination, and sensation.¹⁴

For Wharton, the work-of-art is not so much an object of study as an epistemological problem, an enigma that can never be solved, and she tries to convey a sense of this enigma to her own readers. It is for this reason that Wharton addresses her readers the way she does. Mary Suzanne Schriber observes that 'Wharton must have assumed an audience steeped not only in travel books about Europe and acquainted with the predictable European shrines, but highly educated in literature and art as well' ('Self-Discovery' 265). Indeed, Wharton has a high estimation of her readers' intellectual and critical abilities. As she states in the preface to her collected ghost stories, 'reading should be a creative act as well as writing' (*GS* 2). But in addition to addressing her readers on an intellectual level, her travel writings also appeal to our imaginations, emotions, and spiritual sensibilities. For instance, Wharton's response to Rheims Cathedral assumes a knowledge of history, while simultaneously rousing her readers' imaginations and emotions. In fact, her 'defence' of the 'sentimental' response does not proceed via logical arguments that rely on abstract critical principles and philosophical argument. Rather, she relies on her power to imaginatively and emotionally stir her readers through language:

¹⁴ Her defense of this approach is, admittedly, not as coherent as it might be, for she ends up modulating and denigrating the entire argument by asserting that it is, nonetheless, a 'lesser' kind of response than that of the 'specialist.' Thus, in effect, Wharton once again follows a 'Copernican' critical turn with some hesitant oscillation, in which she begins to doubt herself. As a result, while her defense of this approach is hesitant, it does not close off to the potential surprise of the other. As such, this hesitation is not so much a 'Ptolemaic' gesture as a lack in confidence. For a detailed treatment of Wharton's lack of confidence as a critical writer see Frederick Wegener's introductory essay to *The Uncollected Critical Writings*, titled "'Enthusiasm Guided by Acumen: Edith Wharton as a Critical Writer' (pp. 3-10) as well as his 'Edith Wharton and the Difficult Writing of *The Writing of Fiction*' *Modern Language Studies*. 25.2 (1995): 60-79.

Such a defence is furnished, to a degree elsewhere unmatched, by the exceptional closeness of intercourse to which propinquity admits the traveler at Rheims. Here is the great Presence on one's threshold—in one's window: surprised at dawn in the mystery of its re-birth from darkness, contemplated at midday in the distinctness of its accumulated detail, its complex ritual of stone; absorbed into the mind, into the heart, again at darkness—felt lastly, and most deeply, under the midnight sky, as a mystery of harmony and order no less secret and majestic than the curves of the stars in their orbits. (*MF* 179)

Here Wharton figures the activity of observation in the passive voice, an 'intercourse' that transpires without any reference whatsoever to the traveler herself. Rather, as at Amiens, it is the cathedral that is the subject, the primary focus of activity, though it is an activity rendered in passive voice: first 'surprised' at dawn, then 'contemplated at midday,' then 'absorbed,' until finally, being 'felt most deeply' at midnight, when it is, in fact, at its most obscure and mysterious.

Akin to her description of the Cathedral at Amiens, though in many ways more complex, here the passive voice conveys an intricate dynamic. The cathedral is both *acted upon* by natural forces (the rising and setting of the sun), while simultaneously the one to act upon another, namely, the traveler into whose mind and heart the cathedral is being 'absorbed' and 'felt.' Thus the cathedral is both passive and active simultaneously. It is an entity on which the sun and the stars act, as well as a subject that acts on the traveler via 'the exceptional closeness of intercourse to which propinquity admits the traveler at Rheims.' Thus, once again, Wharton figures the traveler as both active observer and recipient—one on whom the cathedral must impinge and who must simultaneously try to make sense of this impingement. The critic, in this

instance, must allow herself to be impinged upon while poised at the 'threshold' of this great edifice. An interpreter of the cathedral, according to Wharton, is someone whose 'consciousness' has been altered by standing on the threshold and allowing the cathedral to be 'absorbed' and 'deeply felt.' This process effects certain changes in the traveler:

Such pleasures, at any rate, whatever their value as contributions to special lines of knowledge, enrich the aesthetic consciousness, prepare it for fresh and perhaps more definite impressions, enlarge its sense of the underlying relation between art and life, between all the manifold and contradictory expressions of human energy [...] (179-80)

What Wharton outlines here is a process of cognition. An individual confronts the cathedral that stands 'on one's threshold' and is called upon to both receive and to interpret what she receives. And through these dual processes, encompassing activity and passivity, an individual will emerge from the experience other than she was before: her 'aesthetic consciousness' will be 'enrich[ed]' and 'prepare[d]' for 'fresh and perhaps more definite impressions' and this will serve to 'enlarge its sense of the underlying relation between life and art.'

Once again, whatever the limitations of such a universalist assumption, the process she articulates is striking. Wharton is saying that approaching art in the manner she is advocating will alter the viewer's subjectivity, changing the way that other subsequent works-of-art are received and interpreted. According to Laplanche's theory of the subject, such a notion is hardly fanciful or romantic. Rather, because art installs individuals in an asymmetrical communication situation, these are precisely the sorts of subjective shifts cultural encounters can

effect—if one remains sufficiently open to their enigmatic messages. It is precisely this sort of openness (in Laplanche's sense of the word, that is to say, remaining available to the potential surprise of the other) that Wharton is advocating and practicing in her response to Rheims Cathedral.

Finally, the evocative lyricism of Wharton's prose, as she re-presents her encounter with Rheims Cathedral in writing, serves to reinscribe the centripetal vector of her own experience of the 'great Presence.' Just as the cathedral draws her into its orbit, exerting its gravitational pull on her psyche as dawn progresses to midday then gives way to night, so, too, does Wharton's prose attempt to render the mysterious effect of the cathedral for her own readers, trying to draw us into orbit around an image of the cathedral rendered in words—an image that aims to reinscribe the centripetal pull this 'great Presence' exerted on her.

In 1915, Wharton would return to Rheims and describe the cathedral once again to American readers. This time her description appeared in an article written for *Scribner's Magazine*. Part of a series, these articles would subsequently be collected and published in *Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort*. Mary Suzanne Schriber situates these war writings within the genre of travel writing, demonstrating the degree to which Wharton's essays on the war rely on the same tropes as her earlier travel essays, though with very different results. Schriber argues that the 'once-peaceful landscapes [...] previously staged as thrilling and breathtaking and adventures in *Motor-Flight* have become an exercise in the grotesque in *Fighting France*' ('Grotesque' 145). While Schriber sees 'the dream of travel inscribed in *A Motor-Flight Through France* [...] invoked and reversed in *Fighting France*, ' I would suggest that, at

times, *Fighting France* is also grappling with the same critical quandries that *Motor-Flight* does—specifically the epistemological problem of the enigmatic other (143). In other words, faced with the fire-scarred walls of Rheims Cathedral, Wharton confronts a dilemma: how to make sense of this charred ruin and all that it indicates about the current state of the world? Her attempt to respond to this challenge is revealing:

And there, before us, rose the Cathedral—*a* cathedral, rather, for it was not the one we had always known. It was, in fact, not like any cathedral on earth. When the German bombardment began, the west front of Rheims was covered with scaffolding: the shells set it on fire, and the whole church was wrapped in flames. Now the scaffolding is gone, and in the dull provincial square there stands a structure so strange and beautiful that one must search the *Inferno*, or some tale of Eastern magic, for words to picture the luminous unearthly vision. The lower part of the front has been warmed to deep tints of umber and burnt sienna. This rich burnishing passes, higher up, through yellowish-pink and carmine, to a sulphur whitening to ivory; and the recesses of the portals and the hollows behind the statues are lined with a black denser and more velvety than any effect of shadow to be obtained by sculptured relief. The interweaving of colour over the whole blunted bruised surface recalls the metallic tints, the peacock-and-pigeon iridescences, the incredible mingling of red, blue, umber and yellow of the rocks along the Gulf of Aegina. And the wonder of the impression is increased by the sense of its evanescence; the knowledge that this is the beauty of disease and death, that every one of the transfigured statues must crumble under the autumn rains, that every one of the pink or golden stones is already eaten away to the core, that the Cathedral of Rheims is glowing and dying before us like a sunset...
(*FF* 185-6)

Here, Wharton confronts a visage that was once intimately familiar. Her detailed description of their ‘intercourse’ seven years earlier attests to the depth of this familiarity, and yet, despite this intimacy, the cathedral that confronts her in 1915 is a stranger (‘*a* cathedral, rather, for it was not the one we had always known’). What confronts her during the war is un-re-cognizable. Thus a process of cognition must now transpire. And yet, knowledge of this other is far

more elusive than in the past. During her previous encounter, she was 'possessed by it, subdued to it [...] admitted at once to full communion with its incomparable west front' returning 'after each new excursion, to renew and deepen the relation, to become reabsorbed in it,' this time around she cannot get beyond its surface (*MF* 176-7). In 1915, her entire description is focused on physical appearance, as she details the 'interweaving of colour over the whole blunted bruised surface.' Her lengthy list of colors 'deep tints of umber and burnt sienna [...] yellowish-pink and carmine [...] a sulphur whitening to ivory; and [...] a black denser and more velvety' convey the sense of a gaze continually deflected, arrested by the cathedral's damaged surface and unable to travel further. In 1915, there are no discourses on history or literature, just a passing reference to Dante that goes nowhere. There are no technical observations, no spinning of fancies nor waxing lyrically about the anecdotic sculptures. Nor, perhaps more surprisingly, does she use this as an opportunity to denounce the destruction of war, nor even to give any details whatsoever of the battle that inflicted the damage.

Her response to Rheims Cathedral in 1915 consists of a lyric but fundamentally superficial rendering of the cathedral's appearance that trails off in an ellipsis. Where once there was 'intercourse' and 'exceptional closeness,' now there is alienation, for the cathedral is 'strange' and 'unearthly' (*MF* 179; *FF* 185). What was once intimately familiar is now 'a structure so strange and beautiful' that it is difficult to find 'words to picture the luminous unearthly vision' (*FF* 185). Where before there was surrender, now there is resistance. But who is resisting whom? Is it Wharton who cannot surrender herself to the

full impact of its devastation, or is it the cathedral itself that defies her efforts? Or both? Perhaps 'the underlying relation between art and life' that Wharton praises in 1908 has become all too real by 1915, as 'accidents of time' prove to be far less graceful than she had once assumed (*MF* 180; 9).

In 1915, Rheims Cathedral does not evoke any 'historical association' nor is there any sense of 'the relation of the building to the sky above it' (*MF* 178). Her description fails even to relate the cathedral to the town, the surrounding countryside, or the line of trenches to its east. It fails to offer anything beyond a superficial rendering of how 'the blunted bruised surface' looks after the fire. She is unable, to adopt a phrase that she herself employs when criticizing modernist writing, to sound its depths. She can only render its surface.¹⁵

As a result, Wharton's response to Rheims Cathedral in *Fighting France* illustrates a failure of cognition. Unlike her responses to Amiens, Bourges and Rheims before the war, when she confronts the war-ravaged cathedral in 1915, she poses no questions. Nor does she attempt to traverse the 'luminous zone' towards which this enigmatic signifier indicates. These fire-scarred remains indicate to her, beyond her, pointing in many possible directions, but Wharton does not attempt to explore any of them. Instead, she simply opts for surface description, coupled with a somewhat facile and overly romantic assertion that

¹⁵ Wharton consistently expressed her distain for post-war fiction for what she saw as its superficial qualities—its tendency, from her point-of-view, to skim the surface of a subject without registering its deeper significance. See Frederick Wegener's editorial footnote to 'Tendencies in Modern Fiction' (*UCW* 174). Given Wharton's superficial treatment of Rheims Cathedral during the war, a study of the degree to which her own war writings, in fact, possess certain 'modernist' characteristics might prove fruitful.

the cathedral exudes the beauty of death. Wharton's response to Rheims does not yield any concrete insight into the war. Rather, it is simply a tableau of color and light, a reflective surface that fails to be anything beyond an exotic, unknowable other.

Her final image links the shattered remains to a sunset, thereby binding the enigma of the war-ravaged cathedral to a clear signified, the natural beauty of death. By asserting that it exudes the beauty of death, Wharton, in fact, engages in a gesture of 'Ptolemaic' closure. Whereas in her previous encounters in *Motor-Flight*, she engages an interrogative procedure in an attempt to know the other that confronts her, here, she does not. Her response to Rheims during the war is completely declarative. Thus Wharton succumbs to the temptation that she had resisted and argued against at Amiens—namely, reading symbolically. But instead of viewing Rheims as 'a page of history,' she transforms it into a flat tableau of dying light that signifies the natural beauty of death. Here, perhaps, one might be able to locate the seeds of Wharton's later resistance to modernist writing and the crisis of spirit that underpins such formal experiments. When faced with this 'strange' and 'unearthly vision,' she fails to employ the procedure she so consistently uses and advocates before the war when encountering cultural enigmas. Rather, she retreats into declarative descriptions that effect centrifugal closure. Clearly, the trauma of the war had a marked effect on her ability to employ a 'Copernican' critical procedure.

Correspondingly, the quality of what is 'unutterable' in her war time description of Rheims differs markedly from what is 'unutterable' in *Motor-Flight*. This quality of the inexplicable gets remarked upon in her description of

Bourges, and it resurfaces when Wharton confronts Beauvais Cathedral.

Visiting Beauvais in the years before the war, she is led by the town's 'little shuttered non-committal streets [...] tortuously, to the drowsiest little provincial place, with the usual lime-arcades, and the usual low houses across the way; where suddenly there soared before us the great mad broken dream of Beauvais choir—the cathedral without a nave—the Kubla Khan of architecture...' (*MF* 16).

Here again, an encounter with a work-of-art commences with Wharton slipping into passivity, drawn towards the cathedral not by her motor car but by the town's streets, until her progress is arrested by the cathedral itself, an active entity, that 'soared before us,' its effect quickly exceeding language, as Wharton's image of 'the great mad broken dream' trails off in ellipsis, much as the walls of the cathedral itself break off against the sky. While the 'blunted bruised' walls of Rheims are 'dying,' the broken walls of Beauvais are 'like some climax of mystic vision, miraculously caught in visible form, and arrested, broken off' (*MF* 16). In 1915, Rheims Cathedral's 'glow' is likened to a sunset (*FF* 186). It is an ending, a death. At Beauvais eight years before, on the other hand, that cathedral's 'fragmentary glories' are a 'climax' (*MF* 16).

The ellipses in both passages have strikingly different effects as well. At Beauvais, in 1907, the ellipsis occurs at the outset, that centripetal moment wherein Wharton is drawn into orbit around the 'visible form' of this 'great mad broken dream' (*MF* 16). As a result, it conveys a breathlessness and vigor, as if Wharton were momentarily silenced, forced to catch her breath, in the wake of the cathedral's forceful impact. At Rheims in 1915, however, the ellipsis comes

at the end of the passage, a final sigh, a broken death rattle, as it lies helpless and vulnerable to human destructive power.

At Beauvais, conversely, it is the cathedral that is figured as a force of nature, an entity more potent than its feeble human builders or its creator. She imagines 'the panic stricken mason, crying out to the entranced creator: "We simply can't keep it up!";' and the futility and impotence of this poor stone-mason are contrasted with the cathedral, which is seen as holding itself back—its greatness hindered by the inadequacy of its human builders:

it [the cathedral] had to check there its great wave of stone, hold itself for ever back from breaking into the long ridge of the nave and flying crests of buttress, spire and finial. It is easy for the critic to point out its structural defects, and to cite them in illustration of the fact that your true artist never seeks to wrest from their proper uses the materials in which he works—does not, for instance, try to render metaphysical abstractions in stone and glass and lead; yet Beauvais has at least none of the ungainliness of failure: it is like a great hymn interrupted, not one in which the voices have flagged; and to the desultory mind such attempts seem to deserve a place among the fragmentary glories of great art. It is, at any rate, an example of what the Gothic spirit, strove for: the utterance of the unutterable; [...] But shall we not have gained greatly in our enjoyment of beauty, as well as in serenity of spirit, if, in stead of saying "this is good art," or "this is bad art," we say "this is classic" and "that is gothic"—this transcendental, that rational—using neither term as an epithet of opprobrium or restriction, but content, when we have performed the act of discrimination, to note what forms of expression each tendency has worked out for itself? (16-7)

Here again, Wharton takes up her argument with the art criticism of her day and its tendency to judge and assign value by approaching the work-of-art with ready-made principles and applying them. She derides the impulse to hold Beauvais up as an 'illustration' of what an artist ought not to do as facile, while recommending, as she does elsewhere, that one adopt an alternative stance. In this instance, Wharton says that 'to the desultory mind such attempts seem to

deserve a place among the fragmentary glories of great art.’ Significantly, her argument with certain strains of critical thought ends with a long question, one addressed to those who practice this sort of criticism. In posing this question, Wharton suggests an approach to the cathedral that does not aim to apply ‘an epithet of opprobrium or restriction’ but that attempts, rather, to ‘note what forms of expression each tendency has worked out for itself.’ This notion of artistic tendencies working themselves out recalls the imagery of Beauvais as an active agent, forced, by the limitations of its builders, ‘to check there its great wave of stone, hold itself forever back from breaking into the long ridge of the nave.’

But the question that both images seem to beg, the question implicit in Wharton’s response to Beauvais, is the following—who is the artist? Wharton alludes to those facile critics who declare that ‘your true artist never seeks to wrest from their proper uses the materials in which he works,’ but, again, who exactly is the artist? It is not the stone-mason, who is powerless to keep the walls up. She mentions ‘the entranced creator,’ but this figure is given no further mention. Who is he and what is entrancing him? Presumably, he is entranced by the vision he wants the cathedral to embody. The ‘great mad broken dream’ of which Wharton speaks is his. He is the one who wants to ‘render’ a ‘metaphysical abstraction’ in ‘stone and glass and lead.’ But what, then, of the fact that the cathedral is figured as having a life of its own? As Wharton describes Beauvais Cathedral, ‘it had to check there its great wave of stone, hold itself forever back.’ Likewise, she argues that within different artistic styles, ‘each tendency [...] work[s] out for itself’ different ‘forms of

expression' (17). Wharton, it would seem, has curious notions about artistic agency. Who is creating? Is it the building, or the 'enchanted creator,' and what is the relation between these two entities? What does it mean to speak of artistic tendencies working out different forms of expression *for themselves*? What, in short, is the relation between creator and creation?

Creative Practices

Italian Backgrounds, Wharton's first book of travel writing, contains effusive praise for the seventeenth-century sculptor, Bernini. Declaiming his 'genius,' Wharton calls him 'the natural *interpreter* of that sumptuous *bravura* period' known as the Baroque (185).¹⁶ This notion of the artist as an 'interpreter' is an intriguing one, and it surfaces again and again in her other non-fiction book on Italy, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*. Published in 1904, *Italian Gardens* was not a collection of travel writings, but 'a serious work on Italian villa and garden architecture' which quickly became 'a working manual for architectural students and landscape gardeners' (BG 138-9). As such, it was addressed to fellow artists, to those who wish to create Italian gardens of their own. Admittedly, these artists are not writers, but gardeners. But insofar as she is taking up the question of creation, it offers illustrative insights into how Wharton conceives the artistic endeavor.

Interestingly, it is also another example of Wharton addressing the question of critical interpretation, for *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* not only engages a 'Copernican' critical procedure, but instructs other gardeners to adopt

¹⁶ Italics are mine in the first instance ('*interpreter*') and Wharton's in the second ('*bravura*').

such a procedure as well. By ‘Copernican’ procedure, I mean, once again, something very specific: an interpretive stance that involves responding to the artistic enigma that solicits, provokes, and interpellates by keeping the question(s) enfolded in the enigma open, while still achieving some measure of critical closure. Since *Italian Gardens and Their Villas* concerns itself with both questions of interpretation and creation, it is an excellent place to begin exploring the question: how does Edith Wharton conceive of the relation between creator and creation? Or, phrased otherwise, what does Wharton mean when she speaks of an artist, like Bernini, as an interpreter?

Titled ‘Italian Garden-Magic,’ her introduction is positioned, from the outset, as a response to an enigma—an attempt to explore something inexplicable and elusive, something that cannot be bound to a clear signified. It is this ‘magic’ that Wharton takes as her subject:

The traveler returning from Italy, with his eyes and imagination full of the ineffable Italian garden-magic, knows vaguely that the enchantment exists; that he has been under its spell, and that it is more potent, more enduring, more intoxicating to every sense than the most elaborate and glowing effects of modern horticulture; but he may not have found the key to the mystery. Is it because the sky is bluer, because the vegetation is more luxuriant? (6)

Confronted with the ‘ineffable,’ with a ‘mystery,’ Wharton responds with a question: ‘Is it because the sky is bluer, because the vegetation is more luxuriant?’ Wharton then performs another characteristic gesture by incorporating the voices of others:

Some of those who have fallen under the spell are inclined to ascribe the Italian garden-magic to the effect of time; but, wonder-working as this undoubtedly is, it leaves many beauties unaccounted for. To seek the

answer one must go deeper: the garden must be studied in relation to the house, and both in relation to the landscape. (6)

Finding the 'key' to this mystery thus lies in an act, a specific procedure—namely, studying the garden's relation to the house and the relation of both to the surrounding landscape. Wharton is quite specific not only about what ought to be studied (relations between garden and house and surrounding landscape), but also how that studying ought to transpire: 'the garden-lover, who longs to transfer something of the old garden-magic to his own patch of ground at home, *will ask himself*, in wandering under the umbrella-pines of the Villa Borghese, or through the box-parterres of the Villa Lante: What can I bring away from here?' (13; italics mine).

Thus the interpretive procedure that Wharton advocates for the gardener who wants to comprehend the enigma of Italian garden 'magic' is an interrogative one. The garden lover must become a student by asking questions. These questions, according to Wharton, ought to have a specific aim, 'an understanding of the gardener's purpose, and of the uses to which he meant his garden to be put' (13). In other words, Wharton sees the Italian garden as a difficult, mysterious text that the garden lover must interpret through an interrogative procedure that aims to understand 'the gardener's purpose.' Of course, one could easily quibble with Wharton's simplistic assumptions about intuiting artistic intention and bring any number of post-structuralist theories to bear on such notions as 'intention' in order to discredit Wharton. What interests me is not the larger philosophical question of whether intention, even one's own, can ever be understood and how many critical fallacies, intentional and

otherwise, we can accuse Wharton of succumbing to. Rather, what interests me is the fact that the methodology she is outlining for her ensuing study of Italian gardens is, indeed, a *method*, more a set of pragmatics than a checklist of abstract principles.

She opens her discussing of 'garden-magic' by stating that 'It is hard to explain to the modern garden-lover whose whole conception of the charm of gardens is formed of successive pictures of flower-loveliness how this effect of enchantment can be produced by anything so dull and monotonous as a mere combination of clipped greens and stone-work' (5-6). From the outset, Wharton casts the question of criticism in terms of her own situation of address. She is, right away, acknowledging her difficult position of being 'caught between two stools' (Laplanche, 'Transference' 224). On the one hand, there is the enigma of the garden, that text which has addressed her, provoking her to write this critical response. On the other hand, there is the enigma of her own addressees, readers to whom this book is addressed, those individuals whose 'whole conception of the charm of gardens' might consist of the very thing that Italian gardens tend to lack, flowers, which are but 'late and infrequent adjunct to its beauties, a parenthetical grace' (IG 5). Wharton has thus set herself an extremely ambitious critical task: to persuade those very people whose idea of beauty consists in 'flower loveliness' that gardens without very many flowers are deeply beautiful.

Her response to this predicament is not to attempt an explanation *per se*, but to argue, instead, for a certain interpretive procedure. As with the façade of Rheims Cathedral, this procedure involves intellect and imagination. It involves having some knowledge of the history of the house as well as studying the

‘relation’ among house, garden and landscape, that is to say, putting the garden in a larger context. It also involves seeing the underlying design of these parts by ‘*thinking away* the flowers, the sunlight, the rich tinting of time’ (8). In short, Wharton is asking certain readers, those who think beauty lies in ‘flower loveliness’ to alter their vision, to see differently, to find beauty in something *other* than what they normally think of as beautiful. She is asking them, in short, to adopt an alternative point-of-view, a different stance, one that will allow them to find beauty in that which they have formerly not thought beautiful. To what purpose? In order that her readers (in this case, fellow artists/gardeners) might be able to ‘transfer something of the old garden-magic to his own patch of ground’ (13). In other words, Wharton would like to spur her own readers to experience Italian gardens from a fresh perspective, one that will, she hopes, inspire them to respond by transferring, in turn, some of this enigmatic magic to their own gardens. She wants to equip her readers with a way of seeing that will allow them to get a ‘sense of the informing spirit’ of these gardens in order to translate that spirit to an alternative site. ‘Translation,’ in fact, is the very term that Wharton herself adopts: ‘some critics have thence inferred that the Italian garden is, so to speak, *untranslatable*, that it cannot be adequately rendered in another landscape and another age’ (12). Wharton thinks otherwise, and her entire book, is, in a sense, an argument to the contrary, insofar as it undertakes to advocate and then employ, though each successive chapter, an interpretive procedure whose very purpose is translating the ‘garden-magic’ of Italian gardens to one’s own backyard.¹⁷

¹⁷ Clearly, Wharton’s notion of Italian gardens as translatable has certain resonances with

In short, Wharton's introduction to *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* advocates a 'Copernican' interpretive procedure that attempts to respond to a work-of-art on its own terms, a procedure that is fundamentally interrogative and imaginative, and which, as a result, seeks some degree of critical closure not through applying principles, but by extracting something that can then be transferred to another site of inquiry, to one's 'own patch of ground.' In other words, what Wharton advocates is a process of cognition that yields knowledge of another through an attempt to see otherwise. The fruits of this labor are not only a more expansive view of what can be beautiful (not just 'flower-loveliness'), but also something quite concrete—a garden of one's own, a translation of the enigma, a critical response to that enigma that initially provoked Wharton. Thus, in a sense, gardening—the act of creation itself—is a critical act, an interpretive gesture, a response to a provocation, a voice joining a conversation already in progress.

The Question of Artistic Creation

Vance Weston offers a portrait of an individual who undergoes the kind of cognitive shift Wharton advocates in her introduction to *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*. Telling the story of how a 'raw boy' from the Midwest becomes a committed and successful writer, *Hudson River Bracketed* dramatizes the process by which someone learns to adopt and employ a 'Copernican' critical procedure for creative ends (HRB 348).

Laplanche's preference for the term 'translation' over 'interpretation' to describe the human individual's attempts to bind enigmatic signifiers. These correspondences will be explored more fully in chapter four.

At the outset of the novel, Vance responds to the enigmas that confront him with a 'Ptolemaic' reflex, a gesture of centrifugal closure. The opening sentence of the book informs us that, at the age of nineteen, Vance had already 'invented a new religion'—an accomplishment of which Vance is extremely proud: 'Of all the events so far befalling him, none seemed to Vance Weston as important as having invented a new religion' (3). In other words, Vance has responded to life by coming up with a hermeneutics. He attempts to explain this 'religion' to his Grandmother Scrimser, but the conversation quickly devolves into a solipsistic monologue, in which Vance no longer addresses her, but simply closes in on himself:

'The trouble is,' he began, groping about in his limited vocabulary, 'I don't seem to want anybody else's God. I just want to give mine full swing.' At this point he forgot his grandmother's presence, and his previous experience of incomprehension, and began to develop his own dream for his own ears. (17-8)

Not only is the substance of this 'religion' fairly solipsistic ('that's the way I feel about what I call *my* god'), but Vance's manner of communicating with his grandmother is self-centered and, as a result, ineffective (18). Forgetting her presence entirely, he fails to address his ideas to the other with whom he is attempting to communicate. Instead, he simply opts to 'develop his own dream for his own ears'—a narcissistic act of re-centering, which inevitably fails and ends up frustrating him and his grandmother.

Vance responds to the mysteries of the natural world with the same 'Ptolemaic' tendency. His walk through the outskirts of town on a warm spring day stirs 'a passionate desire to embrace the budding earth,' but he quickly

becomes frustrated: 'He was irritated by the fact that he did not know the name of the bird, or of the yellow flowers. "I should like to give everything its right name, and to know why that name *was* the right one," he thought (12-3). His 'passionate desire' to embrace the natural world manifests itself as an irrepressible urge to give a proper 'name' to its inhabitants. He wants to bind the enigmas that solicit him to their proper signifieds, and Vance becomes 'irritated' that he cannot. Vance then undergoes a trauma: he sees his grandfather stumbling up from the river where Vance himself had once 'caught Floss Delaney to his first embrace' (23). His grandfather's demeanor 'slinking along the edge of the grove and mopping his forehead' betrays his involvement in an illicit liaison down by the river. This fact, in itself, does not upset Vance. But when he catches a glimpse of 'the girl slipping through the trees toward Mr. Scrimser' and recognizes her 'quick movements,' he feels 'excruciating physical pain' (33). The trauma of this dark sexual knowledge (that his grandfather, too, has been intimate with Floss Delaney, the very girl Vance still pines for) plunges him into a debilitating, nearly fatal illness.

That very night at dinner, Vance falls ill with typhoid. A month of delirium passes before he recovers. His recovery is figured as a threshold, a liminal realm in which Vance hovers 'between life and death': 'He had not known for how long, after his recovery from his illness, the mind continues in airless limbo between life and death' (28). Vance emerges from this 'airless limbo' utterly changed. Possessed of new vision, he regards the familiar surroundings of his own bedroom 'with alien eyes' (27). Likewise, '[h]e had begun to see the family again: his father first, awkward and inarticulate with the

awe of sorrow just escaped; Pearl concise and tactful, Mae as self-engrossed as ever' (27). But it is the sight of his grandfather, now seen in a completely different light ('powerful, impending' with a 'swarthy forehead' and 'white teeth flashing through the straggling droop of his dyed moustache, the smell of tobacco and eau de cologne') that sends him into a mild relapse (28). He recovers in three days' time, whereupon he asks his mother for pen and paper:

He took the pen, and wrote across the paper: 'Damn him—I hate him—I hate—hate—hate—' [...] He had fancied that writing them out would in some mysterious way dispel the awful sense of loneliness which had repossessed him since he had come back to life. But after his first burst of anger, he felt no relief [...] (30)

What Vance faces in this moment is a crisis of cognition. Not only do his surroundings and his family appear alien to him, so, too, does he appear alien to himself: 'He closed his eyes and tried to picture himself, when he was well again, taking up his usual pleasures; and he turned from the vision, soul-sick. The fair face of the world had been besmirched' (30). Both his world, and he himself, are, to some degree, *un-re-cognizable*. Thus a process of cognition must now transpire. At first, Vance shrinks from the challenge and seeks out his father's revolver. The choice facing him is a stark one: self-annihilation or cognition. He can kill himself, or he can learn to live in a world 'besmirched' by the knowledge that his grandfather has been with the girl whom he loves, whom he had 'embraced' and to whom he had, briefly, been engaged. The outcome of Vance's existential dilemma is revealing in its ambiguity:

He reached his parents' room, walked feebly to the table between the beds, and opened the drawer. The revolver was not there...

Vance's brain reeled. He might have looked elsewhere, might have hunted... but a sudden weakness overcame him and he sat down in

the nearest chair. Was it the weakness of his state, or a secret reluctance to pursue his quest, the unconfessed fear that he might find what he was looking for? He asked himself the question, and could not answer' (30-1)

In this brief passage, words trail off into ellipses twice, as language breaks down in the face of that which is unspeakable: the ultimate enigma of death, of a self trying to conceive of its own non-existence. Then, as life takes hold of Vance, language reasserts itself, and Vance confronts the degree to which his own motives are opaque even to himself: 'Was it the weakness of his state, or a secret reluctance to pursue his quest, the unconfessed fear that he might find what he was looking for? He asked himself the question and could not answer' (31). Faced with the enigma in his own being—that question for which even he is not to have an answer (does he actively want to live, or does he simply lack the courage to pull the trigger?)—Vance responds differently from the way he had responded to enigmas before his illness. Rather than attempting to answer the mysteries of his own existence by inventing a hermeneutics (a new religion) or by fixing his motive to its 'right name' (spiritual cowardice or physical incapacity?), he allows it to remain unbound. Has Vance actively chosen cognition and life, or has he simply continued to live because of a deeper fear of death? This remains an enigma. It is a question for which even Vance is not to have an answer. And he does not seek one. Instead, he responds by taking up pen and paper. Faced with this unknowable other that dwells within, he returns immediately to the writing paper 'on which he had scrawled his senseless curses' and begins a different kind of writing:

He began hastily, feverishly, the words rushing from his pen like water from a long-obstructed spring, and as the paragraphs grew it seemed

to him that at last he had found out a way of reconciling his soul to its experiences. He would set them down just as they had befallen him in all their cruel veracity, but *as if he were relating the tragedy of somebody else*' (31 italics mine).

Unlike Vance's first attempt to write, 'I' is now displaced by 'somebody else.' The primary actor in his first attempt at writing is the authorial 'I' and its own emotional turmoil: 'I hate him—I hate—hate—hate—' (29). This centrifugal response to Vance's cognitive crisis yields no insight and offers no relief. It not only fails to break the boundaries of self, but reinforces those boundaries to such a degree that Vance feels trapped in a solitary prison, from which the only possible escape is suicide: 'he felt no relief, and dropped back again into the solitude which had isolated him from his kind ever since the afternoon when he had leaned against the fence and looked across the maple grove to the river. [...] He was like a captive walled into a dark airless cell' (30).

But after confronting the enigma within himself and allowing that question for which even he is not to have an answer to remain open ('Was it the weakness of his state, or a secret reluctance to pursue his quest, the unconfessed fear that he might find what he was looking for? He asked himself the question and could not answer'), Vance is able to return to the task of writing and approach it otherwise. This time the authorial 'I' is displaced by 'somebody else,' an other who is not Vance. The author is now but one actor among many in the scene of textual creation, and, in fact, a fairly peripheral actor at that.

The impetus for the act of writing has shifted as well. Whereas his first attempt was initiated by Vance himself, for he had specifically requested paper and pen, this time the impulse to write is provoked by the paper itself:

he was resolved not to be beaten, not to accept any makeshift compromise between his fear of life and his worse fear of death. If life it was to be, well—he'd live!

The writing paper lay on the table at his side. He turned over the page on which he had scrawled his senseless curses, and sat with his pen over the blank paper [...] (31)

In this second instance, the impulse to write is a response to the presence of the page lying beside him, combined with the enigma he has confronted, which provokes him to respond. In other words, this act of writing is initiated by an other that is topographically dispersed—the other that dwells within Vance himself (that question for which even he is not to have an answer, his motive for remaining alive) and the other that dwells without (the traumatizing presence of his grandfather, whose actions impinge and threaten Vance's health and existence, along with the paper itself, which lies at his elbow, and whose presence solicits him to write). In other words, the trajectory of the force that compels him to write, to translate his experiences into language, comes from elsewhere. His act of writing is a response. The initial vector in this scene of creation is centripetal.

Once the act of writing is underway, the authorial 'I' recedes, and other actors take over. The 'words' rush forward; 'paragraphs' grow, and this activity yields a discovery, some measure of cognition (*HRB* 31). What does Vance come to know? Vance learns that 'at last he had found out a way of reconciling his soul to its experiences' (31). In other words, what Vance learns is not a set of principles, a hermeneutics of 'right names' that can explain his existence. What he comes to know, rather, is a procedure, a 'way'—a process that affords some degree of relief, not because it allows Vance to express and indulge his

own emotions, but because through this process, his soul, that alien other that dwells within, can become reconciled to 'its experiences.'

In this way, the scene of creation described at the beginning of *Hudson River Bracketed* corresponds to Laplanche's description of the primal scene:

the other's message, which is sexual-presexual and enigmatic, is, as it were, actually implanted in the body—that is to say, it is not taken into account by an ego or an I. For it is important to emphasize that primal repression is a correlate of the constitution of the ego, of the entity that says 'I.' We must ultimately think of a process that is not in the first person, and perhaps not even in any person. ('Seduction' 183)

The experience that propels Vance into becoming a writer, his formative creative experience (the primal scene in the constitution of an author, as it were) corresponds precisely to the dynamic Laplanche outlines as the primal scene for the formation of human subjectivity. Like the enigmatic messages from the adult caretaker, the traumatizing sexual knowledge Vance confronts down at the river-bank becomes 'implanted' in Vance's body. This implantation is figured in the form of a debilitating illness (typhoid), which the doctor declares 'he might likely have picked up drinking the river water' (*HRB* 26). Thus, the river, the site where he spied his grandfather and Floss Delaney, has quite literally infiltrated his body and made him sick.

On the psychical plane, which is by no means distinct from the physical, the knowledge that his grandfather has been sexually intimate with the woman Vance himself loves is an enigmatic message that cannot be 'taken into account by [his] ego.' There is no place for this knowledge, and yet, it can be neither repressed nor foreclosed. This traumatizing sexual knowledge survives the illness and continues to impinge upon his psyche, for the presence of his

grandfather at his bedside reawakens the trauma, sending him into a mild relapse.

It is at this point that Vance is thrown into despair. Unable to repress this traumatizing knowledge completely and incapable of incorporating it into his ego or expelling it wholesale through writing ('I hate him—I hate—hate—hate—'), he is driven to contemplating and almost attempting suicide. Finding himself unwilling or unable to annihilate himself, however, he is then forced to engage in a cognitive process 'that is not in the first person, and perhaps not even in any person' (Laplanche 'Seduction 183)—not 'I hate him—I hate—hate—hate,' but 'words rushing from his pen like water from a long-obstructed spring' (*HRB* 31). The principal actor is no longer the Ego ('I') but language ('words'). Vance's experiences are thus translated into language not from the point of view of an ego (I), but from a third person point of view, the perspective of an imaginary other ('as if he were relating the tragedy of

somebody else').¹⁸ This is part of what Laplanche means when he writes that 'inspiration is conjugated via the other: Its subject is not "the" subject, but the

¹⁸ For Laplanche, the question of which entity is acting is crucial. His critique of Lacanian and Freudian psychical mechanisms hinges on the paradox that, according to these formulations, subjective formation is meant to be unfolding through the acts of 'an *indestructible* subject' ('Implantation' 134). Laplanche writes: 'to introject or project, repress, symbolize or affirm are verbs and processes whose subject, both grammatical and real, is "the subject", the individual himself [...] to Project, to identify, to disavow, to foreclose etc.—all the verbs used by analytic theory to describe psychical processes share the feature of having as subject the individual in question: *I* project, *I* disavow, *I* foreclose, etc. What has been scotomised [...] ? Quite simply, the discovery that *the process originally comes from the other*' (134). For a full critique of psychoanalysis's reliance on what he terms 'ipsocentrist mechanisms,' see Jean Laplanche's

other' whose 'resonance with the originary adult other, this other who comes to re-open at privileged moments the wound of the unexpected, of the enigma' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 48).

It is due to this correspondence between the primal scene and the scene of artistic creation—the fact that both are transferential events initiated by the traumatizing, impinging provocation of an other—that Laplanche links sublimation with inspiration. Both involve an interpretive procedure that follows the 'third vicissitude' wherein '*the sharp goad of the enigma*' is preserved and continues to impinge upon the ego, reminding the subject (Vance, the author who pens the story of what happened to him 'as if' it were 'the tragedy of someone else' (HRB 31) that 'what I don't know, I wish to know nothing of its content; but, "all the same", I sense—endlessly—that I don't really know' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 45).

This creative-cognitive procedure, which Laplanche would call inspiration, is dramatized once again when Vance arrives in Paul's Landing. The strangeness of the Hudson River landscape intrigues and provokes Vance, who has never left the Midwest. Upon arrival at the Traceys' home, he immediately remarks on the huge, shady trees surrounding the house, and the following morning, he responds to the view outside his bedroom window by 'pulling his pen and a scrap of paper from his pocket' and trying to write a poem (HRB 38; 44). This process involves a constant shuttling from the landscape beyond the window to his own interior landscape, in other words, a constant oscillation from

'Implantation, Intromission' and 'A Short Treatise on the Unconscious' in Ed. John Fletcher. *Essays on Otherness*.

the enigma within to the enigma outside, the other within to the other
outwith—both of which Vance finds inscrutable:

“Arcane, aloof, and secret as the soul—” He liked that, for the first line of the poem about the city built of leaves, which was of course a forest. *Secret as the soul.* There were times when his own soul was like a forest, full of shadows and murmurs—*arcane, aloof*—a place to lose one’s way in, a place fearsome, almost, to be alone in. And then: *secret.* That too was true. He often felt as if his own soul were a stranger inside of him. A stranger speaking a language he had never learned, or had forgotten. And there again was a good idea; the idea of the mysterious stranger within one’s self, closer than one’s bones and yet with a face and a speech forever unknown to one. (44-5)

In this scene of creation, otherness is not monolithic. Alterity, in the above-quoted passage, is topographically dispersed. There is the unintelligible other that dwells within him ‘a stranger inside’ who speaks ‘a language he had never learned, or had forgotten,’ and there is also the enigmatic other that dwells without, the other that provokes him to respond by writing a poem—namely, the trees, which are ‘*arcane, aloof, and secret as the soul.*’ Likewise, in the earlier scene of creation following his typhoid relapse, there is the enigma within Vance (the unanswerable question of his own motive for remaining alive) and there is the enigmatic and traumatizing sexual message that comes to him from without, a message addressed to him (however unintentionally) by an external other (his grandfather).

The parallels between the scene of creation described above and Laplanche’s primal scene are clear. Both are asymmetrical communications situations that install an individual in transference. Thus, like the critical enterprise, the act of creation is also one of the ‘intersubjective constellations’ which all have in common the fact that they reproduce and renew the situation of

primal seduction' (Laplanche, 'Source-Object' 131). The cultural domain, then, installs individuals in transference *on both ends of the equation*: at the site of reception (those receiving the cultural message, critics, readers, etc.) and the site of creation (those sending the message, authors, artists, and so on):

The cultural message, the artistic 'creation,' is situated beyond a purely pragmatic aim (to produce such and such an effect on an addressee, by using some particular means). It is, in its depths, provoked by the 'nameless public,' 'scattered in the future,' who will one day receive (or not) this message in a bottle.

The 'cultural' thus seems to me to be one of the precursors of the analytic situation, specifically because of the 'hollowed-out' transference it installs. (Laplanche, 'Ucs.' 111)

It follows, then, that the artist, like the critic, is also 'caught between two stools, the enigma which is addressed to him, but also the enigma of the one he addresses, his public' ('Transference' 224). Laplanche himself grants as much:

[...] the poet or the creator in general is exposed to another appeal, that of the *public*. [...] the indeterminate other, to which an infinite and non-returnable message is addressed: the other of the century to come, to paraphrase Stendhal. [...] it is the public's expectation, itself enigmatic, which is therefore the provocation of the creative work.

There would thus be an opening, in a double sense: *being opened by* and *being open to*—being opened up by the encounter which renews the trauma of the originary enigmas; and being opened up to and by the indeterminate public scattered in the future. ('Inspiration' 49).

In other words, the author faces the same dilemma as the critic, the dilemma explored at length in the previous chapters: how to respond to the enigmas that provoke us without succumbing to narcissistic re-centering?

But perhaps more to the point, these 'intersubjective constellations'—the creative act and the critical enterprise—expand the field of otherness beyond that which exists in other transferential situations. If one were to simply read a

novel, one would be installed in transference insofar as the act of reading is a response to the gravitational pull of an other (novel). The initial trajectory of the event, as explained in the first chapter of this study, is centripetal and thus transference is installed. Such an event involves receiving the cultural message, but it does not require the recipient to *translate* the substance of her response to this enigma into language, which is precisely what critics do. This further turn, translating a response to a provocative enigma into language for subsequent others to receive, is why Laplanche explicitly differentiates between the position of 'the recipient' of the cultural message and the 'recipient-analyst' or 'art critic' ('Transference' 224). In addition to the other that dwells within (the unconscious) and the enigmatic textual other (literary text) that 'renews the traumatizing, stimulating aspect of the childhood enigma' (224), there is yet *another other*. This subsequent other is essential to both the creative and critical situations—the 'nameless public, 'scattered in the future' who will one day receive (or not receive) this message in a bottle.'

It is this enigma—the question of the 'nameless public'—that Vance confronts when he tries to translate the enigma of the trees into a poem. Further explanation requires that we back up for a moment and examine the course of events one step at a time. Upon recovering from typhoid, Vance discovers a procedure through which his soul (the other that dwells within) can reconcile itself to its experiences. But merely discovering this procedure is by no means sufficient for creating 'art.' Simply because he has this 'Copernican' interpretive procedure at his disposal does not guarantee that his translations (poems) of the enigma that solicits him (the unfamiliar trees of this new

landscape) into language will be compelling to others ('the nameless public').

Possessing this procedure alone is not sufficient, as Vance quickly realizes, for after the initial surge of inspiration wears off, Vance finds himself at a loss:

'whenever he tried to write poetry nowadays the same thing happened: after the first few lines, which almost wrote themselves, the inspiration died out' (47).

Read in light of Laplanche's revalorization of inspiration as sublimation, the question Vance confronts is: how to maintain the centripetal vector that initiates the creative event in order to provoke and interpellate subsequent others (readers) ? *Hudson River Bracketed*, then, can be read as the story of how an author learns to keep inspiration alive. Or, phrased in Laplanchean terms, it is the story of how an individual learns to translate enigmas that provoke and solicit him into language, while still maintaining 'the dimension of the enigma despite the avatars of repression' ('Inspiration' 45). And, as Vance Weston illustrates, the first step in this learning process involves learning how to engage a certain interpretive procedure, one that elicits a response (poem or story) that follows Laplanche's third vicissitude, allowing the '*sharp goad*' of this enigma to continually impinge upon and prod the writer's own psyche without closing off to it. This is precisely the dynamic that Laplanche identifies in Freud's

Leonardo:

Creation [...] is as if *shot through by the trajectory of investigation*, or more precisely, of the 'quest.' But in what direction does this trajectory point? [...] what call it forth and orients it is a trajectory that comes from the other [...] an opening, an exposure of the soul, to the trauma of the other. [...] The trajectory is centripetal, it comes from the other; and all the subject can do is to remain open to the trauma and by the trauma. ('Inspiration' 47)

Thus, according to Laplanche, the creative and the critical (or investigative) are inextricable. Both involve responding to the provocation of an enigmatic message. And, as Wharton's discussion of cathedrals illustrates, critical responses require acts of imagination and empathy, 'a mind that feels,' while creative responses (poems and stories) require acts of investigation, or analysis (*MF* 178). In other words, in order to become a writer, Vance Weston must first learn how to read and how to respond to what he reads—that is to say, before becoming a writer of literature, he must learn to be a critic, an interpreter of the fictional subject. And, for Wharton, that means learning and employing the same 'Copernican' procedure that she adopts when responding to French cathedrals and Italian gardens.

Conclusion

All of which carries us back to where this chapter began. Casting a glance back over the ground that has been covered, one finds that Wharton's responses to individual works-of-art reveal someone striving to not only practice, but also strenuously defend a 'Copernican' critical procedure. From Nohant to Amiens to the gardens of Italy, Wharton consistently attempts to address each cultural enigma she encounters as a unique entity, resisting temptations to read these artifacts reductively via "Ptolemaic" gestures of centrifugal closure. Instead, she consistently tries to determine, through asking questions, what each particular work is trying to be and to assess it on those terms.

For Wharton, interpretation involves a subject-to-subject relation, and the procedure she advocates and adopts in *Motor-Flight* and *Italian Gardens* attempts to sustain and nurture an 'intercourse' between traveler and cathedral, between gardener and garden, between writer and text (*MF* 179). Much of the time, her responses to individual works-of-art delve deeper than simple aesthetic evaluation, seeking to gain some knowledge of the enigma that interpellates and solicits her as well as to explore the various questions such knowledge inspires. In other words, Wharton seeks not only to gain some knowledge of the enigma that confronts her, but also to examine 'the light it casts on questions beyond its borders' and explore 'the width of this luminous zone' (*UCW* 127). As a result, her responses to particular works-of-art are, for the most part, acts of cognition, encounters that unsettle and reshape any preconceived images or assumptions she might have had about the work in question. Likewise, her written descriptions of these encounters reinscribe for her own readers the 'centripetal' vector that, according to Laplanche, initiates any act of criticism or interpretation. For this reason, *Motor-Flight* and *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* are prime examples of 'Copernican' criticism.

Only when she confronts Rheims Cathedral during the war does she lapse into the sorts of gestures of centrifugal closure that compromise so many of her critical articles. This observation, combined with the fact that her most consistently 'Copernican' critical article was written in May, 1914 ('The Criticism of Fiction'), suggests that the war had a profound affect on Wharton's ability to practice the kind of openness she advocates and employs in *Motor-Flight* and *Italian Gardens*. And yet, such an assertion must be modified, for

although she sometimes struggles to engage and sustain this critical procedure when confronted with works-of-art after the war, there are certain instances when she succeeds (her 1934 article on Proust, for instance).

In addition, it is important to recognize that, for Wharton, this ‘Copernican’ critical procedure is indistinct from the creative process—given that she believed a fiction writer needs to be an interpreter of the fictional subject, an idea that will be explored more fully in the next chapter. For Wharton, as her comment about the sculptor, Bernini, and her depiction of Vance Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed* illustrate, an artist is, at his best, an interpreter. Thus, because her post-war writing includes such novels as the Pulitzer-prize winning *The Age of Innocence*, it could be argued that, in a sense, her ‘Copernican’ approach to interpretation continued unabated after 1914, producing some of its most refined and effective expressions after the war.¹⁹

My exploration of Wharton’s practice as a critic led, via *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, to a discussion of *Hudson River Bracketed*. Specifically, Wharton’s novel chronicling the process by which Vance Weston becomes a writer was read as a detailed account of the very cognitive shift Wharton undergoes in the presence of cathedrals in *Motor-Flight* and which she advocates in her introduction to *Italian Gardens*.

¹⁹ More accurately, perhaps, I would suggest that while the ‘Copernican’ interpretive procedure she advocates in ‘The Criticism of Fiction’ and practices in *Motor-Flight* continues unabated in the imaginative realm, as her post-war novels attest, it is more compromised when operating in other areas, as my previous chapter suggests. A more complete exploration of the war’s influence on Wharton’s critical practice lies outside the parameters of this study. Such an exploration would be fruitful and intriguing, and, to my mind, it would have to include an examination of *In Morocco* (1919), which would assess whether she confronts the cultural enigmas she encounters there with the same procedure she employs in *Motor-Flight*. It would also have to address her interpretive stance in *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919).

Dramatizing the degree to which the creative and critical impulses are indissociable, *Hudson River Bracketed* becomes, in a sense, the story of how an author learns to read the fictional subject in such a way that it might provoke subsequent readers. This is the dilemma Vance confronts as he struggles to write his poem about the trees outside his window, and it's a question that has been left open.

So, how does a fiction writer maintain the centripetal vector that initiates the creative event in order to provoke and interpellate subsequent others (readers)? How, in other words, does one create a text that is other-unto-itself, that contains an unconscious, a text that is sufficiently enigmatic to provoke subsequent readers into reading it? How does an individual craft a message that is enigmatic enough to draw readers into its orbit? How does one create a text that is 'literary' as opposed to being merely 'therapeutic.'²⁰ Or, to use Wharton's terms, how does one create a novel, as opposed to autobiographical writing?

These are the very questions Edith Wharton addresses in *The Writing of Fiction*.

²⁰ I mean 'literary' here in the sense that Wharton does when she speaks of 'the verdict of time' in her article 'Permanent Values in Fiction' (*UCW* 177). That is to say, I mean 'literary' as a highly pragmatic term that requires the following questions to be asked of a text: does it continue to provoke readers into reading it for generations to come; and do these readers continue to find the imaginative world rendered therein authentic and compelling? In other words, that which can said to be 'literary' is that which continues to be enigmatic to those 'nameless' addressees who are 'scattered in the future' (Laplanche, 'Ucs.' 111)

Chapter 4

Practicing Fiction

I could not do anything if I did not think seriously of my trade; & the more I have considered it, the more has it seemed to me valuable & interesting only insofar as it is 'a criticism of life' [...]

—Edith Wharton
Letter to Dr. Morgan Dix
December 5, 1905¹

In the opening sentence of *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), Edith Wharton declares that the ensuing volume will 'treat of the practice of fiction... the most fluid and least formulated of the arts' (7). By 'the practice of fiction' Wharton does not mean that her book is a tidy how-to guide for creative writing students, a clear distillation in which the various elements of the fiction writer's craft are parsed and explained. For Wharton '[t]o treat of the practice of fiction' means to explore the tangled and labyrinthine processes involved in creating a literary text. Like the critical enterprise, writing fiction is, for Wharton, a practice, an event, an act—not an abstract set of doctrines or a transparent system of discrete skills that can be explained, taught, and mastered. In *A Backward Glance*, she reiterates this notion, declaring that her chapter on fiction writing will deal 'not with any general theory of technique but simply with *the question of how some of my own novels happened to me*' (199-200; italics mine).

Wharton views writing fiction as an epistemological problem that corresponds to the question of criticism, an unanswerable question to which a writer responds by using the same 'Copernican' procedures Wharton adopts and advocates in her critical writings. Describing how she felt upon completion of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton writes: 'When the book was done I remember

¹ *Letters* 99.

saying to myself: "I don't yet know how to write a novel; *but I know how to find out how to*" (BG 209). Thus, for Wharton, writing fiction is a practice in every sense—not only an event, but also a process of discovery. To write, according to this formulation, is no so much to be in possession of a subject, or even to be in possession of a method. (In fact, as will soon become clear, writing fiction actually involves being dis-possessed by a subject.) Writing fiction, according to Wharton, involves having at one's disposal a means through which to discover the appropriate method by which to translate this or that particular subject into a story or novel. As she remarks at the close of her chapter 'Constructing a Novel': 'each time the artist passes from dream to execution he will need to find the rules and formulas on the threshold' (WF 86). The practice of writing fiction, in other words, is not knowing how, not being in possession of these 'rules and formulas.' Rather writing fiction involves 'know[ing] how to find out how to.' And, indeed, it is Vance Weston's learning how '*to find out how to*' that forms the subject of *Hudson River Bracketed*.

For this reason, *The Writing of Fiction* grants primacy to practice; and insofar as any theories of fiction emerge from Wharton's treatise, they shift and fluctuate. In the opening chapter, Wharton sets forth a methodology that is more method than logos, more practice than principle. The 'first assumption' of this methodology rests not on any abstract theoretical construct, but on a process, an act—the act of *choosing*, of selecting:

On the threshold of any theory of art its exponent is sure to be asked: 'On what first assumption does your theory rest?' And in fiction, as in every other art, the only answer seems to be that any theory must begin by assuming the need of selection. [...] To choose between all this material is the first step towards coherent expression. (11)

For Wharton, fiction is primarily an event that is performative *and* constitutive, though what it constitutes is not a set of doctrines to be systematically applied. Rather the ‘constructions’ this practice generates are questions—questions that often lead to theorizing, but this theorizing does not yield Theories. Wharton explains precisely the sort of theorizing she hopes to generate by treating the practice of fiction, as she draws a sharp distinction between those ‘green’ theories that grow out of questions that the practice of fiction inspires and the ‘gray’ theories that involve ‘consciously laying down rules’ and then enslaving oneself to their inflexible dictates:

The art of fiction, as now practiced, is a recent one, and the arts in their earliest stages are seldom theorized on by those engaged in creating them; but as soon as they begin to take shape their practitioners, or at least those of the number who happen to think as well as to create, perforce *begin to ask themselves questions*. Some may not have Goethe’s gift of formulating answers, even to themselves; but these answers will eventually be discoverable. [...] Other writers do consciously lay down rules, and in the search for new forms and more complex effects may even become slaves of their too-fascinating theories. (83 italics mine)

In other words, Wharton’s *The Writing of Fiction* attempts a theorizing of the former sort by pursuing a process of questioning, rather than by seizing on an abstract formulation and then illustrating how her subject (fiction) conforms to that construction. Refusing to force the art of fiction to be ‘pent up in the rules deduced from it,’ Wharton allows theories to spring from the process of pursuing questions that her own practice of fiction has generated—a practice which, by 1925, had spanned nearly thirty years (*WF* 85). As a result, *The Writing of Fiction* is not a ‘treatise’ in the conventional sense. It is not a systematic exposition that presents a theoretical framework and then demonstrates how that framework, in fact, structures the subject being discussed, and to evaluate it on such terms is to render it a great disservice. Nor is *The Writing of Fiction* a

Jamesian-style effort to fit the elements of a fiction into over-arching, metaphorical models. Indeed, the above-quoted passage goes on to deliver a gentle posthumous critique of James's obsession with abstract theoretical formulations in the latter part of his career. As a result of these theoretical obsessions, Wharton states, James's later novels became 'intellectual houses for the next generation to live in,' for as James 'became more and more preoccupied with the architecture of the novel he unconsciously subordinated all else to his ever-fresh complexities of design, so that his last books are magnificent projects for future masterpieces rather than living creations' (84). Wharton concedes that '[s]uch an admission may seem to reinforce the argument against theorizing about one's art,' but she goes on to assert that 'the quest for an intelligible working theory' is a risk worth taking, since most often 'such thought that they [practitioners of fiction] spare to their art, its range and limitations, far from sterilizing their talent will stimulate it by giving them a surer commend of their means' (84). Believing that the art of fiction will not 'fully realize itself unless those who practice it attempt to take its measure and reason out its processes,' Edith Wharton attempts to do just that (85). Perhaps, she seems to suggest, the problem is not 'theorizing about one's art' *per se*, but *how* one goes about such theorizing. And this *how* is crucial to Wharton and to her readers, those trying to understand the theories that emerge from this welter of theorizing on the 'fluid' practice of fiction.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, the 'processes' involved with fiction writing, which Wharton attempts to 'measure and reason out,' are figured as asymmetrically recursive: the practice of fiction generates certain questions, and the pursuing of those questions by the practitioner will yield certain intelligible

working theories, which in turn will 'stimulate' and modify the practitioner's practice of fiction, which will yield further questions, whose pursuing will yield new theories and/or modify former practices, spiraling endlessly in a kind of mobius strip in which theory and practice are hardly discrete entities. Another way to envision this process is through Laplanche's notion of transference, in which the hollowed-out transference (that question of the enigma that resists all assimilation) is transferred to an alternative site of inquiry. Laplanche calls this 'the cyclical character of transference,' though it is far from a two-dimensional circular pattern, in which 'the same furrows or ruts [are] being indefinitely traversed' ('Transference' 231). Rather, as Laplanche's diagram of the transference dynamic illustrates, transferring the hollowed-out transference follows the course of a spiral (231). It is precisely this spiraling pattern that Wharton's theorizing follows in *The Writing of Fiction*.

Thus, insofar as her aim is to pursue a question until it yields a working theory, that will, in turn, generate another question, which she will then pursue, and so on and so forth, Wharton's theorizing transpires via a transference dynamic that attempts to transfer each hollowed-out transference from one site of inquiry to another. Such a 'Copernican' process means that her book takes on formal characteristics that differ from more conventional treatises. It is, I would suggest, for this reason that the book has been largely overlooked or dismissed.²

While Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* has the status of a classic, hailed as

² A notable exception is Frederick Wegener's 'Edith Wharton and the Difficult Writing of *The Writing of Fiction*.' *Modern Language Studies* 25.2 (1995): 60-79. This article traces the halting and sporadic process that characterized the production of the articles that later became *The Writing of Fiction*, outlining the considerable anxiety Wharton suffered when writing these articles, which she found very difficult to write. Wegener's article also revalorizes Wharton's treatise, claiming that taking it 'together with *The Craft of Fiction* [Lubbock's book] several decades later, one finds that Wharton's study is far more disciplined and tautly cohesive [...] while it is Lubbock's volume, on the contrary, that can seem meandering and ponderous, often prolix and opaque where hers is crisp and sharply focused' (74).

a fine example of New Criticism in the United States, Wharton's *The Writing of Fiction* is essentially unknown outside Wharton studies. As Frederick Wegener remarks, 'its distinction as one of the first such full-length critical treatises by a woman makes this neglect much harder to understand' ('Difficult Writing' 76). Once again, I would suggest that the alternative stance Wharton adopts, and through which she treats her subject, goes a long way towards explaining this neglect.

While *The Writing of Fiction* endeavors to 'treat of the practice of fiction' by attempting to 'reason out its processes,' this 'reasoning out' does not take the form of a progression in which one process is isolated, parsed, exhausted, then left behind as she moves on to next (*WF* 85). Several early reviews, such as one in the *Spectator*, took Wharton to task for failing to adopt this approach: 'the business of presenting and proving a thesis, of developing an argument, demands more consistency and clarity of thought than the business of producing notes, random comments' (*CR* 386). This reviewer goes on to condemn Wharton for producing 'a bundle of notes rather than a closely-woven argument,' declaring that because 'her study is slight and scrappy [...] we cannot accept it as a companion volume to Mr. Lubbock's *Craft of Fiction*' (386). In a similar vein, the reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* believes that 'Mrs. Wharton contributes no new ideas to our enlightenment' and that her treatise 'compare[s] disadvantageously with Mr. Lubbock's masterly analysis' (383).

It is no wonder Edith Wharton was so impatient with the reviewers of her day. Just as *The Mother's Recompense* was not trying to be Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, nor was *The Writing of Fiction* aiming to be Percy Lubbock's

The Craft of Fiction. Rather, *The Writing of Fiction* engages in a mode of theorizing that involves pursuing questions generated by these processes, giving rise to what Wharton calls a 'flux of judgments and theories' (WF 111). In other words, Wharton seeks to theorize about fiction by explicating its *practice*, by translating its complex, internal processes into language. Here, Wharton follows her own oft-repeated advice and allows her subject—'fiction' that 'fluid and least formulated of the arts'—to determine the form, style, structure, and rhetorical strategy of the book. As a result, her treatise does not unfold via linear argument. Rather, it foregoes a teleological structure in which the text progresses like a staircase, each paragraph constituting a unified block of text carefully stacked, one atop another, in a steady ascent towards climactic meaning—thesis promised, dutifully fulfilled, and definitively proven. Her five-chapter treatise does not invite readers on a teleological tramp, in which, signposts given, readers must simply follow a well-marked textual path towards a 'logical' conclusion.

Nor is *The Writing of Fiction* linear in the more microscopic sense. Wharton's sentences often interlock, intertwine, loop back on themselves. Metaphors accumulate, sediment-like, around a single subject. Meaning is deferred, then modified, supplemented, contradicted, reabsorbed, while multiple metaphors are employed to describe the same concept, and 'contradictions' happily coexist. Luce Irigaray's remark in a 1975 interview could easily apply to Wharton's *The Writing of Fiction*:

Its 'style' resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept. Which does not mean that it lacks style, as we might be led to believe by a discursivity that cannot conceive of it. But its 'style' cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position. (*This Sex* 79)

Wharton's own remarks about Proust describe the rhetorical approach she herself adopts in *The Writing of Fiction*: 'A tiny 'blaze,' here and there, on the bark of one of the trees in his forest, suffices to show the way; and the explorer who has not enough wood-craft to discover these signs had best abstain from the journey' (WF 117). Indeed, readers of Wharton's attempt 'to treat of the practice of fiction' are 'explorers.' To read this book is to embark on a 'journey' in the truest sense of the word, for it involves surprises, challenges, mysteries, unfamiliar terrain, hard scrabbling to keep from getting lost, but affords sweeping vistas for those who persevere. In other words, *The Writing of Fiction* requires readers to adopt the interpretive stance that Wharton advocates and employs throughout her critical prose. We must, in short, 'remain available to the other who comes to surprise' us (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 47). But beyond simply remaining 'open' in Laplanche's sense of the term, readers of *The Writing of Fiction* must try to follow the complex vicissitudes of Wharton's thinking, as she spirals through this process of questioning and subsequently transferring of those questions. Readers of Wharton's explorations into the practice of fiction must, in other words, acquire 'enough wood-craft to discover' the signs that mark the way, for the path is not signed in a conventional manner. As a result, readers of Wharton's treatise need to engage in a different kind of reading than critical treatments generally demand—one that involves constant recursive, spiraling movements.

Practices of reading

Passages in *The Writing of Fiction* are *passages* in the dual sense of the word. They are both spatial and temporal. They are blocks of text and active

movements, but the movement required for these passages to become intelligible is not always linear and progressive, but most often recursive. Likewise, the spaces they describe and inscribe are rarely mappable. Wharton's passages are spaces of text through which readers must pass by stepping from one word to the next, but they also require passage back and forth from page to page, chapter to chapter, one sentence to another, one phrase to another in order to search out referents, modifying clauses, definitions delivered elsewhere but relevant here. In short, for Wharton's conception of the practice of fiction to become intelligible requires recursive interpretive actions on the part of readers. To interpret any given passage requires a leap here and there, forwards and backwards to revisit a term defined in a previous chapter, to follow a recursive flow of thoughts, floating through their various currents and eddies, which Wharton allows to pool, then rush forward, circle back, pool again, spiral, drawing other concepts into its flow, then releasing them, drifting onto a different topic for several pages, until once again, the text is floating back into a pervious current of thought, though this time around, it may appear slightly altered, somehow different from its previous incarnation. As, once again, it would be with a spiral, which would pass across the same axis over and over again, but each time the circumference has widened. Any explication of a passage from *The Writing of Fiction* must engage in multiple movements. For example, at the close of her chapter 'Constructing a Novel,' Wharton re-stages the scene of a text's creation, and in doing so, rhetorically enacts the creative processes she seeks to re-present:

Here another parenthesis must be opened to point out once more that, though this world the artist builds about him in the act of creation reaches us and moves us through its resemblance to the life we know, yet in the artist's consciousness its essence, the core of it, is other. All

worthless fiction and inefficient reviewing are based on the forgetting of this fact. To the artist his world is as solidly real as the world of experience, or even more so, but in a way entirely different; it is a world to and from which he passes without any sense of effort, but always *with an uninterrupted awareness of this passing*. (85)

Initially, it appears that Wharton views the site of textual creation as a tidy set of Chinese boxes: the writer erects a fictional space (text) ‘about him,’ while simultaneously being contained ‘in’ a larger temporal-spatial entity called ‘the act of creation,’ as, for a moment, Wharton does seem to erect a clear hierarchy of creative dominance and submission/transmission: the writer ‘builds about him’ an imaginative ‘world’ (the text, an external structure) while simultaneously being enfolded ‘in’ a larger temporal entity, namely, ‘the act of creation.’ At first Wharton seems to be setting up a hierarchy—one that would place the writer on the receiving end of one master (the act of creation), and then, through the process of subjecting herself to that master, would enable the writer to enact her own mastery by producing a literary text. But what about this ‘act of creation’—that temporal-spatial entity *in* which Wharton couches the writer at the beginning of the passage? After all, Wharton does place the writer *inside* this act—using a preposition that implies both a temporal and a spatial interiority (this world the artist builds ‘about him *in* the act of creation’; italics mine), and it is still intact by the end of the passage.

But here is where readers must perform a double movement. Explication requires a movement outwards, in this instance, to a previous passage in the first chapter of the book, where Wharton dismisses out-of-hand any enfolding or omnipotent guiding force (such as ‘the act of creation’) to whose will fiction writers must submit: ‘Many people assume that the artist receives, at the outset of his career, the mysterious sealed orders known as ‘Inspiration,’ and has only

to let that sovereign impulse carry him where it will' (18). She goes on to explain that, far from a 'sovereign' master, inspiration 'comes most often as an infant, helpless, stumbling, inarticulate, to be taught and guided' (18). 'Inspiration' is hardly a wise, all-powerful entity firmly leading the writer according to 'its will,' nor is it a benevolent muse who enfolds and nurtures the writer. Rather, it resembles an infant that the writer must nurture, teach, and guide. And yet, the writer is hardly an expert either, for Wharton compares the writer to a 'young parent' who 'makes mistakes in teaching his first child' (18). Thus Inspiration does not lead and guide a fiction writer, but must itself be 'taught and guided,' for it is a child, willful yet 'inarticulate,' autonomous yet 'stumbling,' separate now, but once part of a mother's body, a quixotic being who changes with each passing day, who might bear some resemblance to a parent, but who also possesses a separate and unique identity, a being who is other, an unpredictable entity whose will is not 'sovereign' at all. Although, as Wharton herself concedes, 'the "inspirational" theory is a seductive one,' she makes it very clear that there is no larger, all-encompassing entity that plays a dominant role in a text's creation—thereby disrupting any tidy schematics one might wish to inscribe (18).

In the above-quoted passage, Wharton describes the process of textual construction as a fluid, shifting space whose boundaries are too diffuse and elusive to be fixed and inscribed. By locating the imaginative world of the text not only 'about' the writer but also '*in the artist's consciousness*' (italics mine), Wharton disrupts any attempt to divide the fictive space into tidy spatial/temporal schematics (*WF* 85). According to Wharton, while the text flows from the writer's pen, the fictional space exists both *outside* the writer

(‘about him’) as well as *inside* (‘in the artist’s consciousness’); the text exists as *both* a material and a psychical entity. But while this fictive space exists *both* within and outwith the writer, simultaneously located *in* her ‘consciousness’ and ‘about’ her self, the text is *of* neither realm. Thus while impossible to fix it spatially, it is also impossible to determine its origin. The text has no clearly traceable origin, no ‘true’ source, for it is native to neither the ‘world of experience’ nor to ‘the artist’s consciousness.’ In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton refers to this realm from which a literary text emerges as ‘that mysterious other-world of invention’ (210-11). In the passage quoted above, she explains that although the text possesses a ‘resemblance’ to the ‘world of experience,’ it is also ‘entirely different’; likewise, although this fictional construction that flows from the writer’s pen also resides simultaneously ‘*in* the artist’s consciousness,’ it is not part of the artist’s self, it is not *of* the writer’s consciousness. In other words, Wharton’s ‘other-world of invention’ involves exploring an enigma *in*, not an enigma *of*, which is precisely the sort of procedure Laplanche advocates:

When we hear enigmas talked of, I propose this procedure: to move from the enigma *of*, to the enigma *in*, and then to the function of the enigma *in* [...] so, the enigma of mourning takes us to the function of the enigma in mourning: what does the dead person want? What does he want of me? What did he want to say to me? (‘Time’ 255).

In short, according to Laplanche, the enigma and its function impinge on an individual, who responds by asking questions, ones that are unanswerable. His primary example involves the enigma of death, or mourning. But insofar as Laplanche advocates an examination of the enigma in mourning, this involves exploring a series of questions provoked by death, the ultimate enigma: ‘what does the dead person want? What does he want of me? What did he want to say to me?’ (qtd above). Such knowledge is impossible and always elusive. But the

process it sets in motion is not futile, for in pursuing these questions, 'analysis goes back along the threads of the "other"' and there emerges 'a primal "to-be-translated" [...] a message unknown to itself' ('Time' 258-9). And, what is a literary text, in a sense, but 'a primal "to-be-translated" [...] a message unknown to itself'? And, in attempting to articulate the processes through which such an enigmatic message 'unknown to itself' might emerge, it makes sense that Wharton would figure the scene of creation in such terms. Indeed, just as Laplanche sees the function of the enigma in mourning as exploring the precise way a subject feels impinged upon by the one who has died and struggling to respond to a series of unanswerable questions (what does he want from me?), Wharton feels haunted by characters who are, in a sense, dead to her—that is to say, characters whose lives have been written into her novels and are, therefore, fixed and immutable as far as the writer is concerned. Indeed, Wharton often talks of feeling haunted by her characters: 'I am conscious that the strange beings who have commissioned me to tell their story are not satisfied with the portraits I have drawn of them' (*BG* 209).

The point of drawing this comparison between Laplanche's theory of subjective development and Wharton's conception of the scene of creation is simple: the scene of creation, like the scene of interpretation and the act of reading, transpires in transference. It is a moment wherein an individual is drawn into orbit around an other, who cannot be definitively known, but whose impingement triggers a process of exploration that can yield fresh elaborations, that is to say, a literary text.

Of this enigmatic 'world the artist builds about him in the act of creation,' Wharton stresses that 'its essence, the core of it, is other' (*WF* 85). A

'core' usually denotes the innermost cavity of any space, an origin, a center.³ But center of which space? Where? If the text inhabits both material and psychical spaces at once—as Wharton suggests—then any attempt to fix the text's 'core' in one position would involve reducing Wharton's fluid, fictive space to stable, discrete elements that produce a univocal meaning, 'making the text a reassuring closed retreat... familiar, snug, canny' (Felman, 'Phallacy' 10). Which entity holds the dominant position during the construction of a fictive space? Text or writer? The 'world of experience' or 'the artist's consciousness' (*WF* 85)? The ineffable 'act of creation' or 'the life we know'? Reader or text? Recall Wharton's description of Beauvais Cathedral. Who, in the end, was in the dominant position? Who was in charge? The 'panic-stricken mason' or the 'entranced creator' or the cathedral itself, whose walls defied the dogged efforts of both creator and builder (*MF* 16)

Even to pose such questions creates false divisions, for Wharton's passage continually disrupts such clear-cut boundaries, making discrete separations impossible to inscribe and maintain. Indeed, the schematics of Wharton's house of fiction cannot be drawn, because its rooms do not stay still long enough to be measured and surveyed. But Wharton's house of fiction, though unmappable, is by no means vague or inaccessible. Quite the opposite: the textual space, though foreign and separate, can be accessed from multiple directions. Readers can access this space 'through its resemblance to the life we know' while the writer can access it by passing 'to and from' its rooms 'without any sense of effort, but always *with an uninterrupted awareness of this passing*.' Here Wharton emphasizes the act of passage in which a writer must engage

³ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate gives as its first definition: 'a central and often foundational part usu. distinct from the enveloping part by a difference in nature <~ of a city>.'

during the scene of creation in order for the text to be transmuted into language; the writer must pass from self to other in order for the text to be embodied, for it to take shape 'about' the writer—a crucial aspect of its diffuse internal/external existence.

Given this state of affairs, any attempt by the writer during the scene of creation to fix the textual other, to hold it in a stable position, would kill the text, and presumably, 'the question of the text and the text as a question' (Felman, 'Phallacy' 10). If a fictional text can only be figured in language (that is to say, come into existence) through a writer's act of passage from self to other, then the moment a writer assimilates its 'core,' which is 'other,' by subsuming it in her consciousness, making it wholly a part of her self, the need to pass from one space to another, from self into other, disappears and with it, all textual vitality. Phrased otherwise, the moment an author engages in a 'Ptolemaic' gesture of narcissistic re-centering, the text that flows from her pen will cease to be other-unto-itself and, as a result, will not be sufficiently enigmatic to provoke and compel readers.

Thus any attempt by fiction writers to fix the textual other, to subject it to total mastery, kills the text that is being constructed by deadening its characters and reducing them to a flat, lifeless existence. In order for a story to come alive on the page, to *live* through language, its 'core' must remain other, its *difference* must not be eradicated or assimilated by the writer at any point. In other words, any act of narcissistic re-centering would prevent the text from coming alive for subsequent readers. 'Ptolemaic' gestures are, therefore, out of the question. An author must learn to employ a consistently 'Copernican' interpretive procedure, which is precisely the challenge Vance Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed* faces

when trying to write a poem about the trees outside his window. All of which begs the question: how, precisely, does a fiction writer go about translating a subject in such a way that the text that results that will provoke and compel subsequent readers?

The Writing of Fiction addresses this question by first discussing what *not* to do. Emphasizing the necessity of maintaining this difference between writerly self and textual other, she outlines two of the most common ways fiction writers attempt to establish total mastery over the textual other: either by imposing a vice-like plot on the text that ‘seizes the characters in its steely grip, and jiu-jitsus them into the required attitude’; or by taking full possession of the characters, turning them into a mere extensions of the writer’s own subjectivity, so that they become:

often without the author’s being aware of it, the standard-bearers of his convictions or the expression of his secret inclinations. They are *his* in the sense of tending to do and say what he would do, or imagines he would do, in given circumstances, and being mere projections of his own personality they lack the substance and relief of minor characters, whom he views coolly and objectively, in all their human weakness and inconsequence. (*WF* 94-5)

In contrast, characters who are ‘free to go about their business in the illogical human fashion remain real to writer and readers’ (95). Wharton praises Jane Austen for having a ‘sense of her limitations as certain as her sense of her power’ and posits that, as a result of Austen’s creative restraint, characters in her novels ‘evolve as real people do, but so softly, noiselessly, that to follow the development of their history is as quiet a business as watching the passage of the seasons’ (91). For Wharton, the scene of a text’s creation involves a blurring of boundaries, wherein the writer must pass from self to other in order to translate the text into language in a way that allows the text to remain alive so that it can

occasion and undergo another process of translation—this time in the hearts and minds of readers. And herein lies the ineluctable boundary that must limit and structure any practice of fiction: a fictional text must come alive for its readers. Wharton does not explore *why* this is the case, for ‘[t]o ask why this matters more than anything else would lead one into the obscurest mazes of the aesthetic; but the fact is generally enough admitted to serve as a ground for discussion’ (111). Thus textual vitality is an ineluctable fact of writing fiction and one that any practitioner must accept and embrace. As such, this ‘aseptic magic’ of a text that comes alive when read constitutes the one and only ‘stable fact’ to consistently emerge ‘out of all the flux of judgments and theories, which have darkened counsel in respect of novel-writing, and so ‘the quality the greatest novelists have always had in common is that of making their people live’ (111).

Thus maintaining textual difference is not important simply because Wharton assumes that ‘difference’ is *a priori* valuable. It seems important to emphasize this point, since, over the past fifteen years, ‘difference’ has become a kind of buzz word in critical discourse. As Rita Felski observes, ‘difference’ has become a term ‘routinely invoked in intellectual debates [...] as an unassailable value in itself, seemingly irrespective of its referent or context. Difference has become doxa, a magic word of theory and politics radiant with redemptive meanings’ (1). Felski finds this positivistic invocation of the term problematic, insofar as such invocations often grant an autonomy and conceptual primacy to ‘difference’ that ‘seems incompatible with the poststructuralist paradigm on which theorists of sexual difference simultaneously rely’ (5). Wharton is not arguing for ‘difference’ as ‘an exemplary symbol of alterity’ (Felski 7).

According to Wharton, fiction writers must value difference for solely pragmatic reasons. Difference is crucial to the practice of writing fiction insofar as one accepts this notion ('generally enough admitted'), that a fictional text must live in the hearts and minds of readers (*WF* 111). It is for this reason, according to Wharton, that fiction writers must maintain textual difference throughout the scene of creation. Phrased otherwise, in order for the text that an author creates to be sufficiently enigmatic—sufficiently other-unto-itself—to provoke readers, to draw them into orbit around itself, the author must maintain its difference from herself. Only if the text remains other to its creator will it be sufficiently other to its readers.

This notion of a writer allowing characters to remain 'free to go about their business' leads to Wharton's concept of 'objectivity.' Whenever Wharton refers to the need for a writer to maintain 'objective', she does not mean that the writer should adopt an attitude of unemotional scientific neutrality. Rather, she means that the writer must resist the temptation to subsume the text—the fictional creation—wholly within her own subjectivity. She uses the term 'objectivity' as an antonym (in the Kantian sense of the word) for all-consuming subjectivity that cannot see beyond boundaries of its own self, and as a result, assimilates everything outside of it into a mere extension of that self. Wharton believes this kind of voracious subjectivity renders the practice of fiction impossible:

The subjective writer lacks the power of getting far enough away from his story to view it as a whole and relate it to its setting; his minor characters remain the mere satellites of the principal personage (himself), and disappear when not lit up by their central luminary. (58)

Wharton's choice of imagery is revealing. The aim of a fiction writer is for the characters whose adventures she is transcribing *not* to exist in orbit around the writer. That is to say, the writer ought not to be the sun ('central luminary') around which the characters in a book orbit. The galaxy that is the scene of creation must not, in short, be 'Ptolemaic.' A 'Ptolemaic' creative procedure is the wholly 'subjective' one. Rather, it is this 'objective faculty' on the part of the writer that Wharton cites as the main difference between writing confessional narratives and practicing fiction, and the reason 'the autobiographical tale is not strictly speaking a novel, since no objectively creative effort has gone into its making' (58). For Wharton, the key to practicing fiction is maintaining an inter-subjectivity between writer and text, and this inter-subjectivity can only transpire if boundaries between the writer's own subjectivity and the textual other are present, yet permeable. The reason for maintaining this distance is so that the text has the power to come alive for others, to evoke in readers' minds a separate process of recognition, which, then, can yield to a measure of cognition—much as Wharton's initial moments of recognition at Nohant yielded to cognition, as projected images were displaced by fresh elaborations, ones that maintained the 'sharp goad' of the enigma that confronted her, while simultaneously achieving some measure of closure.

Another way to understand Wharton's notion of 'objectivity' is via Laplanche's corresponding concept of 'benevolent neutrality.' For Laplanche, this is the most productive stance for an analyst to take in relation to her patient. According to this formulation, an analyst must 'bring experience and knowledge—that of the method—but also a radical refusal to know the good of its patient, to know the truth about its good' ('Transference' 228). And yet,

resisting the temptation to define what this 'good' is does not mean affecting lack of concern for the patient or adopting a demeanor of cold detachment. Rather, 'benevolent neutrality' requires an analyst 'to want the good of the other without ever claiming to know what it is' and, the result of such a stance is 'a positive, creative conception of neutrality, productive of the enigmatic dimension' (228). How does the analyst go about occupying such a position? By taking care to maintain her own internal alterity and offering that to the patient. In other words, by maintaining the alterity of one's own inner other (the unconscious), the hollow of one's own enigma, and offering that hollow as a kind of screen, or blank page. In so doing, transference will be provoked: 'We offer the analysand a "hollow", our own interior benevolent neutrality, a benevolent neutrality concerning our own enigma' (229). The patient then responds either with 'filled-in' transference or 'hollowed-out,' and the process unfolds accordingly.

Correspondingly, according to Wharton, an author must adopt a similar stance when approaching her fictional subject.⁴ The corresponding dynamics of Laplanche's 'benevolent neutrality' and Edith Wharton's 'objectivity' can be best illustrated by a further glance at *Hudson River Bracketed*. If Vance Weston adopts the same stance towards those external enigmas that provoke him (trees) to his own internal enigmas (am I alive because of cowardice, or sheer will to live?), he confronts these external enigmas with his own internal 'hollow' what ensures will generate a literary text, as long as he can pass back and forth from

⁴ In *Italian Backgrounds*, Wharton advocates adopting an interpretive stance that corresponds with Laplanche's 'benevolent neutrality.' Arguing against 'artistic absolutism' and 'intolerance' that condemns the Baroque as 'debased' (that is to say, arguing against John Ruskin), Wharton believes art critics should approach the city of Rome more 'philosophically' in order that they might 'begin to understand and to sympathize with the different modes in which man has sought to formulate his gropings after beauty' (IB 182 184).

one to the other without subsuming either enigma in his ego, or in Wharton's phrase, his own 'all consuming subjectivity.' In fact, *Hudson River Bracketed* describes Vance's second work of fiction (a short story titled 'Unclaimed') in these terms:

The new tale was different; less vehement, less emotional, and above all less personal. Was he already arriving at an attitude of detachment from his subject? [...] Well, the charge of subjectivity could hardly be brought against the tale she had just read. Boy as he was, the writer had moved far enough away from his subject to see several sides of it. (HRB 220-1)

Unlike his previous story ('One Day'), which he had written in a single burst after his recovery from typhoid and which involved highly autobiographical material, 'Unclaimed' is the story of a soldier's body being sent back from France to the Midwest during the war. This story is portrayed as a success because its writer 'had moved far enough away from his subject to see several sides of it' (221). Just as the analyst must resist claiming to know the good of the patient, the author must resist possessing her characters. A writer must resist turning characters into 'mere projections of his own personality' and opt instead for a more 'objective' position—one of 'benevolent neutrality—which will allow the writer to see and transcribe 'their human weakness and in consequence' (WF 94-5). Crucial to the success of 'objectivity' is a writer maintaining her own internal enigma, just as Vance Weston in *Hudson River Bracketed* does when confronting the enigma of why he is still alive, when he leaves the question of what prevented him from killing himself open. Wharton's belief in an author maintaining the alterity of the other will be discussed further, when Wharton's concept of the 'fictional subject' is addressed below.

This text which is not one...

For Wharton, fiction is ‘an art in the making, fluent and dirigible’—an organic construction she alternately figures as a plant, a house, an orchestral symphony, a ripe fruit, a breaking wave, a hybrid growth, an inheritance, a haunting, *haute cuisine* (WF 10). Through the accumulation of these diverse and shifting metaphorical constructions—all of which happily coexist in *The Writing of Fiction*—Wharton seeks to convey the shift and flux that characterizes ‘that strange chameleon-creature, the modern novel, which changes its shape and colour with every subject on which it rests’ (47). Such sediment-like accumulations of figurative language disrupt critical attempts to ascribe univocal metaphorical equivalence to the practice(s) of fiction. In other words, Wharton’s theorizing does not unfold exclusively through univocal equivalence. Rather, it proceeds via multiple, excessive figurations.

Such an approach has left *The Writing of Fiction* open to accusations of being ‘imprecise’ and ‘confused and repetitious’ (Vita-Finzi 27, 46). This characterization appears in the one book-length study of Wharton’s critical prose, which claims that Wharton ‘fails to formulate clearly a theory of the technique that balances her account of inspiration. She frequently expressed her belief in the need for a formula [...] but her attempt to expound one is confused’ and concludes that ‘in all her discussion of technique she retreats into oracular utterances’ (Vita-Finzi 27, 42). Rather, I would suggest that, in light of Laplanche’s re-valorization of inspiration as sublimation, as a way of responding to the provocation of an enigma without reversing its centripetal vector, Wharton’s discussion of inspiration is complex and highly revealing. Indeed, her account of inspiration opens up Laplanche’s theory, concretizing, to a

degree, what in Laplanche's more abstract formulations. But more to the point, Wharton's reliance on metaphorical excess has given rise to accusations of imprecision and being 'oracular.'

Rather, Wharton relies on metaphorical excess, an overflow of concurrent figurations that possess 'contradictory' characteristics, because the processes she describes cannot be bound to a single signified. Metaphoric equivalence would be a reductive act of centrifugal re-centering, which is why Luce Irigaray's remarks about a kind of 'discursivity' that 'resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept' help elucidate Wharton's treatise (*This Sex* 79). While perhaps tidier metaphoric formulations might have garnered better reviews from critics and more understanding from scholars, it would have done a disservice to the processes Wharton was attempting to describe. Wharton makes this clear in the opening sentence of the book, which announces that 'the practice of fiction' is the 'most fluid and least formulated of the arts' (*WF* 7). As such, if her subject is to determine the form, substance, style, rhetorical strategy, and structure of the book, as Wharton believes one's subject ought to do, *The Writing of Fiction* must attempt to reinscribe this fluidity.

The scene of textual creation, according to Wharton, is fluid not only in that the entities involved cannot be fixed into stable positions, but because these entities themselves are not discrete. The actors involved do not possess unified, unequivocal identities. For Wharton, the practice of fiction is *both* consciously constructed by human hands (house, symphony) *and* alive, with an existence outside full human control (a plant, a fruit, a wave). Thus Wharton's theorizing might be described as unfolding via language that engages a dynamics of the

near, as well as a dynamics of the proper.⁵ To explore Wharton's conception of the multiplicity of textual identity requires a circling back to the parenthesis Wharton opens in order to follow its associative ripples further out:

To the artist his world is as solidly real as the world of experience, or even more so, but in a way entirely different; it is a world to and from which he passes without any sense of effort, but always *with an uninterrupted awareness of this passing*. In this world are begotten and born the creatures of his imagination, more living to him than his own flesh-and-blood, but whom he never thinks of as living, in the reader's simplifying sense. Unless he keeps his hold on this dual character of their being, visionary to him, and to the reader real, he will be the slave of his characters and not their master. When I say their master, I do not mean that they are his marionettes and dangle from his strings. Once projected by his fancy they are living beings who live their own lives; but their world is the one consciously imposed on them by their creator. Only by means of this objectivity of the artist can his characters live in art. (WF 85-86)

On the surface, Wharton's use of the master-slave dialectic might appear to contradict previous statements regarding the impossibility of fixing any actor—writer, text, inspiration, and so on—into a position of dominance. While characters within the text 'live their own lives,' they do so within certain external limits 'imposed on them by their creator.' And yet she also makes clear

⁵ Insofar as any metaphorical construction is a vertical one, and thus, according to Irigaray, an example of language generating meaning via dynamics of the proper, Wharton is employing *both* dynamics (near and proper) here—though not in the Lacanian sense of the metaphoric *subsuming* the metonymic. Irigaray posits that metonymy generates meaning via a dynamics of the near, relying as it does on association and horizontal relation, while metaphor relies on a dynamics of the proper, that is to say, vertical equivalence. Here Irigaray is drawing on Lacan's discussion of metaphor and metonymy in 'Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious' and reworking some of his ideas; specifically, Irigaray explores his assertion that metaphor *contains* metonymy within it and the philosophical implications of that statement for women, who are, Irigaray argues, the metonymic function underpinning the metaphors of Western philosophical discourse. Thus Irigaray seeks to refigure Lacan's assertion that 'desire is a metonymy' (Lacan 193) (because the object of desire is continually deferred, which means that desire is not a relation to an object but to a lack), and since women are what stands in for this lack within Western symbolics, since women are the Lacanian *petit objet à*, Irigaray sees great importance in dislodging the metonymic from its customary linguistic function of propping up metaphorical equivalence. Wharton accomplishes such a dislodging, I would suggest, through her accumulated metaphor technique, which places metaphors in a metonymic relation to one another, and thus ends up disrupting the conventional linguistic hierarchy wherein the metaphorical absorbs the metonymic. It is this kind of linguistic disruption that Irigaray calls a 'dynamics of the near' and sees as crucial to effecting this 'elsewhere' that will wrest discourse away from an economy of logos. See 'The 'Mechanics of Fluids' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, pp. 109-111.

that they are not 'his marionettes' who 'dangle from his strings.' Here Wharton's definition of 'objectivity' (as the antonym of all consuming subjectivity on the part of the writer) is crucial: this imposition and maintenance of structure by the writer does *not* involve wholesale assimilation or appropriation of the textual other. It is not mere authorial whim or totalitarian decision-making, for, as Wharton takes pains to explain time and again in *The Writing of Fiction*, the formal structure of any fictional text, while constructed and maintained by the writer, arises from an exchange between writer and fictional subject: 'Every 'subject' (in the novelist's sense of the term) must necessarily contain within itself its own dimensions, and one of the fiction-writer's essential tasks is that of discerning whether the subject which presents itself to him, asking for incarnation, is suited to the proportions of a short story or of a novel' (33). A fiction writer must *read* the fictional subject by attending to and interpreting the language this subject uses when 'asking for incarnation.' In other words, an individual is provoked by an enigma (fictional subject) and attempts to respond by writing a novel, or story.

Here Wharton's concept of the 'fictional subject' becomes relevant. What Wharton terms the 'fictional subject' is that initial throb of an idea, thought or feeling that pulses through a writer and will one day become a novel or short-story. Like the scene of textual creation, the 'fictional subject' is a spatial-temporal entity. It is the period of time *and* the imaginative space the writer inhabits *prior to* textual translation, that is to say, before putting pen to paper.⁶ The fictional subject is the gestation period *and* the womb wherein what will be transmuted into language grows and takes shape. A time and space

⁶ In a sense, the fictional subject is the textual other *before* the translation process begins, before pen is put to paper, before it can be said to be *textual*—for the textual other is both psychical *and* material, while the fictional subject is *only* psychical, imagined.

marked, once again, by a fluid dynamic wherein boundaries between writer and 'subject' are blurred and penetrated: 'Subject, obviously, is *what the story is about*; but whatever the central episode or situation chosen by the novelist, his tale will be about only just so much of it as he reacts to' (22). Thus the fictional subject is inter-subjective: it is a site where elements of the writer's consciousness blend and shape those facets that the subject already possesses when it 'presents itself' to the writer (33).

As such, any 'mastery' a writer might be said to exercise during the scene of creation is provisional. Authorial 'mastery' does not entail total dominance over the fictional subject or textual other, for, according to Wharton, this world that is 'consciously imposed' by the writer on the subject cannot be the mere product of some dictatorial whim fitted randomly onto the text by the author. Indeed, she chides writers who 'for lack of letting it [subject] reveal all its potentialities' end up 'dashing this way and that in quest of fresh effects' and 'hunting about for arbitrary combinations of circumstance,' which result in a work of fiction that does not give the reader 'the warm scent and flavour of a fruit ripened in the sun' but rather 'the insipidity of one forced in a hot-house' (43). Likewise, she rejects 'the mechanical ingenuities of 'plot'-weaving' in favor of 'this faculty of penetrating into a chosen subject and bringing to light its inherent qualities' (117). Thus the formal structure a writer 'consciously imposes' on the fictional subject in translating it into language (effecting a text) must spring from a process of 'discerning,' of *attending to*, the 'dimensions' already contained within the subject itself. Its textual form (the writing) must spring from a writer's *reading* of the subject in question. The fictional subject

cannot be translated into a text that is exclusively a reflection of the writer—a mirror image of the writer's own subjectivity.

But, in addition, a fiction writer is not a transparent medium through whom the fictional subject flows, unaltered, unchanged, for the literary text into which the subject gets translated *is* the writer's response to the subject ('his tale will be about only just so much of it [fictional subject] as he reacts to' (22). A writer must attend to the fictional subject and proceed with 'objectivity' (subjective distance) when engaging her 'precious instinct of selection,' and as a result, this 'objectivity' (subjective distance) serves her in two ways: by allowing her to resist assimilating a fictional subject entirely into her own subjectivity and, simultaneously, by preventing the fictional subject from consuming the writer and hampering her necessary 'work of selection' (41, 100). Wholesale enslavement, she believes, is a fate fiction writers must avoid. It is to warn would-be practitioners of fiction of this dangerous temptation that she employs the master-slave paradigm; for fictional subjects are unruly creatures, and, if allowed total freedom to range across the page any way they please, they will not come to life for the reader:

When a novelist has been possessed by a situation, and sees his characters hurrying to its culmination, he must have unusual keenness of vision and sureness of hand to fix their lineaments and detain them on their way long enough for the reader to recognize them as real human beings. [...] The tendency of a situation to take hold of the novelist's imagination, and to impose its own *tempo* on his tale can be resisted only by richness and solidity of temperament. (98-9)

Wharton warns that for a writer to embrace a subject and deliver it on the page in all its 'unsorted abundance' does not constitute the practice of fiction, for 'fiction can never, in the last analysis, be anything, or need be anything, but

the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence [...] if the tales embodying them are to fix the attention and hold the memory' of readers (14).

Thus Wharton's master-slave analogy supplements, rather than contradicts, the fluidity of spatial relationships at the scene of creation and the consequent impossibility of establishing the dominance of any one actor. Besides, how can conventional master-slave roles be assigned to entities that are not solid and unequivocal, but fluid and diffuse? According to Wharton, no discrete, coherent identity exists for any of the actors involved. She makes this clear in the passage previously examined and quoted above, her open parenthesis to which we must now return once again:

To the artist his world is as solidly real as the world of experience, or even more so, but in a way entirely different; it is a world to and from which he passes without any sense of effort, but always *with an uninterrupted awareness of this passing*. In this world are begotten and born the creatures of his imagination, more living to him than his own flesh-and-blood, but whom he never thinks of as living, in the reader's simplifying sense. Unless he keeps his hold on this dual character of their being, visionary to him, and to the reader real, he will be the slave of his characters and not their master. When I say their master, I do not mean that they are his marionettes and dangle from his strings. Once projected by his fancy they are living beings who live their own lives; but their world is the one consciously imposed on them by their creator. Only by means of this objectivity of the artist can his characters live in art.
(WF 85-86)

As this passage unfolds, textual identity undergoes a progressive mitosis. First, the text consists of 'creatures of his [writer's] imagination'—plural, multiple creatures comprise this text, but these individual 'creatures' do not possess discrete identities of their own. Rather, there exists a 'dual character to their being': they appear one way to the writer and another way to readers; they appear differently to each perceiving subject. And yet, Wharton emphasizes that the key challenge for the writer is to 'keep[s] his hold' on this 'dual character of their being, visionary to him and to the reader real.' In short, the writer must

always remain aware that she views these textual 'creatures' differently from the way(s) readers will perceive them. So not only is a text's appearance 'dual,' but the writer, too, must maintain a split vision.

And yet, the textual mitosis Wharton describes is not even that straightforward, for the division is far from simple dualism. The text is not just 'visionary' to the writer; the text does not dwell *only* in that realm—the psychical, the illusory, the immaterial—the text is also, simultaneously, 'more living to him [the writer] than his own flesh-and-blood,' yet he does not 'think of [the text] as living, in the reader's simplifying sense.' To a fiction writer, the text is alive *and* constructed (a plant *and* a house), psychical *and* material. But while it exists as such for readers as well (for whom the fictional text lives, yet at the same time, they also *know* it is constructed: the dynamic commonly dubbed 'suspended disbelief') the precise nature of textual existence for readers will differ, for while the text's writer must maintain objective distance in order to carry out her process of reading the subject and selecting which parts to translate into language, readers—if they are to experience the full impact of a fictional text—must allow themselves to be utterly consumed and seduced by it in a way the writer cannot. Indeed, the passage that flows from Wharton's opened parenthesis continues with a lively explanation of these perceptual differences:

Only by means of this objectivity of the artist can his characters live in art. I have never been much moved by the story of the tears Dickens is supposed to have shed over the death of Little Nell; that is, if they were real material tears, and not distilled from the Milk of Paradise. The business of the artist is to make weep, and not to weep, to make laugh, and not to laugh; and unless tears and laughter, and flesh-and-blood, are transmuted by him into the substance that arts works in, they are nothing to his purpose, nor to ours. (86)

Elsewhere Wharton elaborates on these different modes of perception, when she distinguishes between ‘imaginative emotivity’ and ‘its objective rendering’ (15). It is these subtly different dynamics that distinguish the ‘sympathetic’ imagination of a text’s readers and the ‘creative’ imagination of its writer:

the chief difference between the merely sympathetic and the creative imagination is that the latter is two-sided, and combines with the power of penetrating into other minds that of standing far enough aloof from them to see beyond, and relate them to the whole stuff of life out of which they but partially emerge. Such an all-around view can only be attained by [...] detaching one part of his imagination from the particular problem in which the rest is steeped. (15)

But while the writer must maintain a ‘duality of vision’ during the scene of creation, textual identity refracts beyond mere doubling. A text possess a ‘dual character’ insofar as it appears differently to each perceiving subject (readers versus writer), but Wharton also makes clear that textual identity is *not* merely reducible to appearances. Literary texts, according to Wharton, are not comprised solely of the ways they are perceived by those subjects who stand on either side—readers and writers. In other words, textual identity is *not* simply an accumulation of perceptions and reflections, like an onion whose layers maybe stripped away until nothing remains. The textual other is not merely reflective object, a flat surface on which writing and reading are inscribed; the text, according to Wharton, is *a speaking subject in its own right*.

Here Wharton’s concept of the ‘fictional subject’ again becomes relevant. The degree to which the fictional subject informs the ‘dimensions’ of the world the writer ‘consciously imposes’ while effecting the text has already been discussed, but interestingly, Wharton views the exchange between writer and fictional subject as informing every aspect of textual creation. A fiction

writer, she explains, should attend to her subject when it comes to ending a narrative ('obviously, as every subject contains its own dimensions, so is its conclusion *ab ovo*' (39), determining a novel's length ('the length of a novel more surely than any of its other qualities, needs to be determined by the subject(74), deciding on point-of-view and the proper pace of the plot ('They [point-of-view and narrative pace] are rooted in the subject; and—as always, in the last issue—the subject itself must determine and limit their office' (64). When a fictional subject solicits a writer ('asking for incarnation'), the writer must presume that a certain amount of information is 'rooted' in that subject—information to which a writer must carefully attend, or read: 'The very fact that so many subjects contain the elements of two or three different types of novel makes it one of the novelist's first cares to decide which method he means to use' (53).

But this information is not some perfectly formed entity which exists *out there*, locked within a mysterious realm which the writer must penetrate and reveal (via language) the fictional mysteries contained therein. Rather, this knowledge 'rooted' '*ab ovo*' in the fictional subject *is itself partially constituted by the writer's act of reading* (64, 39). However, this fact does *not* mean that the fictional subject is wholly constructed. Such a conclusion would be the result of an inability to break out of reductive either/or logical formulations that insist on univocal answers to ontological questions, and as a result, reduce all possible answers to the label essentialist *or* constructivist. Such an insistence, I would suggest, engages in a simplistic philosophical division that is based on an excessively dichotomous critical phallacy wherein univocity supercedes all else.

It need not be a matter of casting one's lot wholesale with essentialism *or* constructivism. As Judith Butler explains:

the essentialism/constructivism debate founders on a paradox that is not easily or, indeed, not ever overcome. Just as no prior materiality is accessible without the means of discourse, so no discourse can ever capture that prior materiality; to claim that the body is an elusive referent is not the same as claiming that it is only and always constructed. In some ways, it is precisely to claim that there is a limit to constructedness, a place, as it were, where construction necessarily meets its limit. (278)

It is from this 'place' where 'construction necessarily meets its limit,' and where precise boundaries cannot be inscribed and maintained between fictional subject and authorial decision-making that the literary text emerges. The fictional subject solicits and provokes a writer, who must *read* the subject in order to discern and construct the appropriate textual and linguistic structures through which the subject can come to live in the imaginations of others (readers), but simultaneously, it is through the act of naming the fictional subject—of transmuting it into language—that the fictional subject comes into its textual existence (an existence, as explained previously, whose very nature is both psychical *and* material; imagined *and* ink-and-paper). But, Wharton explains, each writer will read a fictional subject differently, because each writer's subjectivity will respond differently to that particular subject, and, as has already been discussed, those responses form an ineluctable part of the fictional subject: 'Should some celestial taskmaster set the same theme to Jane Austen and George Meredith the bewildered reader would probably have some difficulty in discovering the common denominator' (*WF* 35-6).

In addition, because of this process of selection that the writer engages when translating the fictional subject into language, the scene of textual creation always produces an *excess*. There will always be more of the fictional subject

than the writer can include in her textual translation of it. Jane Austen will omit more George Meredith-style elements contained in the subject and vice versa; however, as has already been explained, such a process of selection cannot merely be a dictatorial imposition of Jane Austen onto the fictional subject, but rather, must arise from an ineffable blending and correspondence between the two. Thus a writer will always *read* more in the fictional subject than she can *write*; and this elliptical excess, which writer reads in the subject but does not include in the text the reader reads, will remain within the writer's mind throughout the process of writing, haunting her perception of the text and, in effect, the text itself.⁷ In other words, an author must allow the enigma that initially solicited her to continue to impinge, its 'sharp goad' allowed to constantly prod her consciousness, as she translates the 'fictional subject' into language. That is to say, the authorial process of translation must follow Laplanche's third vicissitude, whereby a repression is achieved (the process of selection transpires; some elements reach the novel, while others are edited out), but it is a repression '*that preserves the sharp goad of the enigma [...]*' Something like: "I know very well; and what I don't know, I wish to know nothing of its content; but, "all the same", I sense—endlessly—that I don't really know' (Laplanche 'Inspiration' 45).

Thus Wharton's fictional subject, like the cathedral at Amiens, is a *sujet supposé savoir*—a subject presumed to know, but the fictional subject's knowledge is inter-subjective, insofar as its knowledge is inextricable from how

⁷ Ernest Hemingway's famous remark about a story being but the tip of an iceberg makes a similar point. Hemingway declares that while the writer only shows the tip of an iceberg to the reader, enough must exist submerged below the surface to communicate a sense that what exists on the page is but a small piece of an entire continent, the greater part of which lies submerged below the surface of the ocean. To my mind, Wharton is making a similar point through her concept of the fictional subject and its excess—an excess to which the writer must attend, though not fully translate into the text itself.

the writer 'reacts to' or reads it (*WF* 22). Wharton's fictional subject is that paradoxical place where 'construction necessarily meets its limit,' but whose textual existence (material incarnation) still relies on writerly construction (Butler 278). In other words, rooted in the fictional subject is what Felman calls 'knowledge that does not know what it knows and is thus *not in possession of itself*' (*Insight* 92). Or, perhaps even more accurate, insofar as Laplanche's formulation reflects a crucial temporal element, Wharton's fictional subject is 'a primal "to-be-translated" [...] a message unknown to itself' ('Time' 259). Just as a human individual is other-unto-herself insofar as she has an unconscious, a fictional subject, according to Wharton's formulation, is also other-unto-itself, something 'to-be-translated' into a literary text.

As a result, according to Wharton, the 'practice of fiction' is an act of interpretation—one that must necessarily be of the 'Copernican' variety. Throughout the scene of textual creation, the writer must attend to her fictional subject—that entity that solicits and provokes her. The initial vector of any act of artistic creation is, according to Wharton, centripetal: a subject solicits a writer 'asking for incarnation,' and this centripetal vector must be maintained if the text that results is to live in the minds of other readers (33). The text (i. e. the linguistic sign of the fictional subject) effected by this writerly interpretive act *changes* depending on the actors involved (is the interpreter Jane Austen or George Meredith?). Phrased otherwise, because interpreter (writer) and interpretant (fictional subject) cannot be separated into discrete entities during the scene of creation—which is, fundamentally, a scene of *interpretation*, since writer must interpret what the subject 'asking for incarnation' is saying in order to perform necessary 'work of selection' and translate the subject into language.

Thus insofar as a fiction writer *reads* the fictional subject (insofar as authoring entails reading, responding to, an other), *The Writing of Fiction* has as much to say about *reading* fiction as it does about *writing* it. In other words, as in Wharton's other critical writings, *The Writing of Fiction* grapples with the question of criticism: how should a critic respond to a work of art? Or, more precisely, in this instance, how should the interpreter (writer) respond to the enigma (fictional subject) that solicits and provokes her? How does the interpreter (writer) produce an interpretation (literary text) that transfers the function of the enigma in such a way that it will continue to provoke other readers? Writing fiction is, for Wharton, an act of criticism. And, insofar as the text (analysis) that results must be enigmatic enough to provoke and interpellate other readers for years to come, it is necessarily an act of 'Copernican' criticism. Or, more precisely, a writer can employ a 'Ptolemaic' approach to her fictional subject, but the literary text (interpretation) that results will not survive the test of time.

Authorial multiplicity: dynamics of the near

Just as the fictional subject contains 'knowledge that does not know what it knows and is thus *not in possession of itself*,' the writer, according to Wharton, is not in full possession of her self either; nor is this writerly self (during the scene of interpretation/creation) discrete or stable (Felman, *Insight* 92). In the final chapter of *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton describes Proust as possessing a 'peculiar duality of vision' that 'enabled him to lose himself in each episode as it unrolled itself before him... and all the while keep his hand on the main threads of the design' (WF 116). Like the text that flows from her pen, the writer, too,

exists in a fluid state—fluid in the Irigarayan sense that she must engage in a ‘dynamics of the near and not of the proper, movements coming from the quasi contact between two unities hardly definable as such’ (*This Sex* 111). These ‘dynamics of the near and not of the proper’ are crucial in ways that have already been explained (primarily, the need for a writer to resist assimilating the textual other and making it her subjective property), but what has not yet been addressed is the degree to which Wharton sees *contiguity*, (Irigaray’s ‘dynamics of the near’), as essential to the process by which a writer effects a text. Wharton states: ‘it [the subject] will be found to act of itself in the hands of the novelist who has so *let* his subject ripen in his mind that the characters are *as close to him as his own flesh*. To the novelist who lives among his creations in this *continuous intimacy* they should pour out they tale *almost* as if to a passive spectator’ (*WF* 65 italics mine). Likewise, she attributes Proust’s genius to his ability to live in close proximity to his fictional creations: ‘his ease in threading his way through their crowded ranks’ allowed him, Wharton believes, to ‘always know whither his people are tending, and which of their words, gestures and thoughts [were] worth recording,’ while simultaneously granting them enough space to maintain ‘their tough vitality [...] and keep carelessly on their predestined way’ (113, 112).

A concurrent ‘dynamics of the near’ is at work in how point-of-view operates in a narrative; however, based on Wharton’s conception of the process, *points of viewing* would be a more accurate term, for she describes the *points* from which a fictional text is narrated as multiple. And it is *contiguity*, according to Wharton, on which a writer must rely when moving among these various ‘angles of vision,’ to keep these *points of viewing* from dispersion:

The difficulty is most often met by shifting the point of vision from one character to another, in such a way as to comprehend the whole history and yet to preserve the unity of impression. [...] it is best to shift as seldom as possible, and to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousnesses persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader *as a whole*. (64)

Again, contiguity is crucial: there must be 'close mental and moral relation' among these 'angles of vision' among which the writer must 'shift' to ensure that the text—though refracted through various 'reflecting consciousnesses'—still 'presents itself to the reader *as a whole*.' Thus Wharton implies that a reader's textual pleasure depends upon contiguity, nearness, a 'close relation' among 'reflecting consciousness' among which the writer 'shifts.' It is this proximate multiplicity of the fictional text that Wharton sees as crucial to readers' textual pleasure.

Luce Irigaray sees a corresponding dynamic at work in female sexual pleasure, erupting as it does from contiguity, continuous contact among parts that resist dispersion without resorting to possession (property):

Woman always remains several, but she is kept from dispersion because the other is already within her and is autoerotically familiar to her. Which is not to say that she appropriates the other for herself, that she reduces it to her own property. Ownership and property are doubtless quite foreign to the feminine. At least sexually. But not *nearness*. Nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible. Woman derives her pleasure from what is *so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself*. She herself enters into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either. This puts into question all prevailing economies: their calculations are irremediably stymied by woman's pleasure, as it increases indefinitely from its passage in and through the other. (*This Sex* 31)

Correspondences between Irigaray's description of how woman 'derives her pleasure' and Wharton's conception of the need for authorial multiplicity resonate far beyond Wharton's discussion of point-of-view. Irigaray's notion of 'passage in and through the other' corresponds with Wharton's description of the scene of textual creation, in which writer must pass between self and the other that resides within her 'consciousness' (this other that is 'already within her and is autoerotically familiar'), without appropriating 'the other for herself' and reducing it 'to her own property.' This other must remain '*so near that she cannot have it*' if it is to be translated in a way that does not flatten or deaden its characters, thereby threatening (destroying?) readers' textual pleasure. This textual pleasure is only possible if a writer enters 'into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other' (Irigaray, *This Sex* 31) through a fluid passage between self and other that transpires 'without any sense of effort, but always *with an uninterrupted awareness of this passing*' (WF 86). And, once again, insofar as the scene of textual creation involves a writer reading the fictional subject, the dynamic applies equally to readers. Thus the above sentence could also be (re)written as follows: textual pleasure erupts when a reader enters 'into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other' (that is to say, a literary text) through a fluid passage between self and other that transpires 'without any sense of effort, but always *with an uninterrupted awareness of this passing*' (WF 86).⁸

During the scene of creation, a writer is 'indefinitely other in herself' (Irigaray, *This Sex* 28), for, according to Wharton, the best novelists are those who 'seem continuously aware that the bounds of personality are not

⁸ Throughout the ensuing discussion, any time the term 'writer' is employed, Wharton's conception of writer as reader of the fictional subject should be kept in mind. Thus when I use the term 'writer' I do so for the sake of flow, as 'writer/reader' would be more accurate. And, insofar as a literary critic is also a reader/writer, I would suggest that such comments apply to literary critics as well.

reproducible by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things' (WF 10). This imperceptible flowing between 'each of us' and 'adjacent people and things' is crucial to understanding how Wharton conceives of the relation between writer and text, reader and text, self and other. In this particular instance, the subject ('each of us') is the agent that penetrates, flows *into* that which is adjacent, but Wharton's 'subject' (whether writer, character or text) just as often finds herself *being penetrated*. For Wharton, that which is adjacent is not a passive object, but an active subject in its own right. This fact is highly significant and by no means benign, since, for Wharton, such inter-penetration entails risks. Allowing one's self to be penetrated by a text is to become vulnerable, to open one's self to a process of surprise that carries the potential of rapturous joys and/or terrifying psychological danger.

Wharton revels in the joy this penetration can yield when she waxes ecstatic about reading Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* in a single breathless sentence that lasts for almost a full page, spilling from one thought to the next and culminating in an exclamatory burst of excitement over the vitality of his characters: 'Ah, how they all live, and abound each in his or her own sense—and how, each time they reappear (sometimes after disconcertingly long eclipses), they take up their individual rhythm as unerringly as the performers in some great orchestra!' (WF 113).

But opening the self to such textual penetration also carries grave risks—risks of which Edith Wharton is well aware, given her experience of reading the book of ghost stories while recovering from typhoid and the relapse she claims this experience triggered. These fears that accompanied her reading-triggered typhoid relapse haunted her for years to come. According to Wharton,

until she was twenty-eight years old, she ‘could not sleep in the room with a book containing ghost stories’ and ‘frequently had to burn books of this kind, because it frightened me to know that they were downstairs in the library!’ (GS 276). Interestingly, Wharton felt most threatened by the ‘formless horrors’ (occasioned and instilled, she believed, by *reading*) while standing on the doorstep after returning from her daily walk. Here, on the threshold between two worlds (outdoors and indoors), she was often ‘seized by a choking agony of terror.’ For Wharton, the threshold is the site of the uncanny, the liminal realm where one can get ‘caught’ by ‘It’ (GS 276). Prompt passage, however, from outside to inside (which prevents any lingering on the threshold) not only keeps this ‘choking agony’ from taking hold of the young Edith Wharton, but induces a ‘rapture of relief.’ Thus, for Wharton, the threshold is the potential site of immense pleasure as well.

The thresholds being crossed extend beyond passage from outdoors to indoors. Specifically, as discussed at length in the opening chapter of this study, Wharton views her typhoid relapse as a period of time when she was alienated from herself. She describes her recovery as a coming back to herself (‘when I came to myself’), as though reading the ghost stories had occasioned an illness that had driven her *elsewhere*, to a place *from which* she subsequently returned, but in this returning to herself, that self changes, becomes different than what it was before. For while she had been ‘a fearless child’ before the relapse (before leaving her self), she ‘lived in a state of chronic fear’ after her return to health (and to self). This dynamic echoes Wharton’s description of writing fiction, wherein the writer passes from self to other and back again in order to effect a text that will live for readers. But as her description of the typhoid relapse

makes clear, there is a grave risk involved in this passage. For in passing from self to other and back again, one risks returning to a self that has been radically altered. Such passages can be highly disruptive and unsettling, since, upon return, one's familiar presence-unto-self (however illusory) might no longer be present.

Thus the very process of cognition and subjective shift described in my opening chapter, a process which unfolds in transference via the maintenance of internal alterity, is what fiction writers, according to Wharton, practice all the time. But, as Wharton makes clear, practicing this mode cognition, being installed in such asymmetrical communication situations and remaining open to the potential surprises such situations afford, carries grave risks. By leaving oneself in order to pass into an other realm—whether moving from out-of-doors to inside a house, or passing from self into the textual other—is frightening, for it disrupts and alters the self. It threatens the integrity of the self (however illusory that integrity might be) because, upon return, one will likely find one's self somewhat un-re-cognizable. And because that self cannot be re-cognized, a process of cognition must take place instead. Put in concrete terms, the young Edith Wharton must become cognizant of what life with a self that is no longer fearless demands: she must now sleep with a light on and a nursemaid in the room; she must be sure to carry a latch-key on her daily walks. She must, in short, learn to live otherwise.

Thus the ineluctable processes of reading and writing are constitutive for all actors involved—texts, writers, and readers⁹, and, from Wharton's point-of-view, constitutionally risky, as her story of the typhoid relapse makes clear.

⁹ In the preface to her collected ghost stories, Wharton writes '(for reading should be a creative act as well as writing)' (2).

Such passages are risky insofar as they may challenge passionately held convictions and alter those beliefs and ideas to which a self often clings, since its identity depends upon them (or so it often seems). More pointedly, as far as the critical enterprise is concerned, a great deal can be at stake, professionally and personally, when those reader/writers commonly known as literary scholars leave themselves behind, allowing texts to penetrate and (perhaps) re-constitute them, for they may find once comfortable theoretical apparati disrupted, familiar analytic tools damaged, since perhaps these critical procedures were rooted in certain theoretical assumptions that have not survived the passage from self to other and back again.

Wharton's *The Writing of Fiction* suggests that not only can interpretation lead to something other than recognition of self—to cognition as opposed to simple re-cognition, to knowledge rather than symmetrically reflective acknowledgement—but that it *must and does*. The evidence, she might suggest, resides in the very fact of that thing we call literature: the very existence of novels, plays, poems, and stories that move readers to tears and laughter, rapture, and pain, that unsettle who we are, disrupt what we believe, and alter what we become. As a result, since both reading and writing are acts of interpretation, and since both have the potential to alter an individual's psyche, both reading and writing, if done in the 'Copernican' fashion that Wharton advocates, transpire in transference. For Wharton, both processes—reading and writing—are inseparable.¹⁰

¹⁰ In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton describes reading books as a child as inhabiting a 'secret wood' while her chapter on writing fiction is titled 'The Secret Garden' (70). Both activities are routinely figured as secret, intimate, mysterious, and akin to nature.

Corresponding practices

Throughout *The Writing of Fiction*, she moves back and forth from reading to writing, so much so, that it becomes immediately clear that Wharton believes that the practice of fiction involves *both* reading and writing. Her final chapter is dedicated entirely to a detailed reading of Proust, but the previous three chapters ('In General'; 'Telling a Short Story'; 'Constructing a Novel'; 'Character and Situation in the Novel') are rife with references to reading other writers' work. Almost every passage in the rest of the book moves seamlessly from scenes of reading to writing and back again. Woven through almost every 'reasoning out' of these processes involved in writing fiction are references to Wharton's own experiences *as a reader*. Austen, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Goethe, Dickens, James, Balzac, Diderot, Scott, Dostoievsky, Stendhal, Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, Poe, Kipling, Le Fanu, Thackeray ... these names form but a partial list of writers whose work she references—not to mention the occasional philosopher (Nietzsche) or visual artist (Uccello) she weaves into the fabric of her discussions. For Wharton, once again, the practice of fiction involves *being a reader* as much as it does *being a writer*.

As such, the practice of fiction requires a double movement on the part of the writer. A fiction writer must not only attend to her fictional subject—by passing back and forth from self and other—but she must also attend to the needs of her own readers, those to whom her textual other is addressed. She must imagine how characters, settings, dialogue, situations, and so on might take shape inside a consciousness *other* than her own:

he [a writer] will never do his best till he [...] begins to write, not for himself, but for that *other self* with whom the creative artist is always in mysterious correspondence, and who, happily, has an objective existence

somewhere, and will someday receive the message sent to him, though the sender may never know it. (*WF* 19)

In other words, the writer must consider *how* the substance that results from passing from self to fictive other should be *addressed* to others, those who are, as it were, on the receiving end of the translation process. In this way, Wharton conceives a fiction writer as occupying the same position as Laplanche's art critic, 'the recipient-analyst (or simply art-critic), who is, in turn, caught between two stools: the enigma which is addressed to him, but also the enigma of the one he addresses, his public' ('Transference' 224). Wharton does not believe it behooves a writer to imagine *particular* readers (critics, friends, publishers, editors and so on), since conjuring up these voices will only serve to create a cacophonous fragmentation in the mind of the writer, causing a healthy multiplicity of vision and perspective to disperse too widely (*WF* 19). Rather, she speaks of the subjective split the fiction writer must maintain and embrace when selecting a mode of address as an act of *correspondence*, of letter writing, between a writer and this '*other self*'—who resides in the writer's consciousness, though is not wholly subsumed by her subjectivity, but 'happily, has an objective existence somewhere.'

The practice of translating the fictional subject into text is thus a kind of epistolary exchange within a self conceived as plural: the writer must construct a self to whom the letter of the text is addressed, a *reading* self with whom the writer's *writing* self must always correspond if the text is to be effected in such a way as to one day affect *other* reading selves—that is to say, those readers who were not present at the scene of its writing, but who 'will some day receive the message sent' even though 'the sender may never know it' (19). Thus there is

yet another process of asymmetrical reflexivity involved in practicing fiction, since, contained within any fictional text 'must be some sort of rational response to the reader's unconscious but insistent inner question: 'What am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does it contain for me?' (23).

Here, again, Wharton argues that the fiction writer must employ the same 'Copernican' interpretive procedure she advocates for the critic—a procedure that involves responding to the provocation of an enigma by asking questions. A fictional subject solicits a writer, the writer approaches translating (interpreting) this subject into a literary text by asking questions, questions that are addressed to the fictional subject *and* to that other reading self who acts as a stand-in for the wider public. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton speaks again of this 'other self' to whom a writer ought to address her work: 'the novelist's best safeguard is to put out of his mind the quality of praise or blame bestowed on him by reviewers or readers, and to write only for that dispassionate and ironic critic who dwells within the breast' (212). Thus not only must the fiction writer adopt a critical posture towards the fictional subject, but the reading self to whom the writer addresses her translation (literary text) must also be a critic, one who is 'dispassionate and ironic' exercising, presumably, 'objectivity' as well. Thus, the conversation between critics and authors that Edith Wharton is constantly advocating throughout her critical articles is, in a sense, an expanded version of the dynamic she sees unfolding *within* the authorial self during the scene of creation. In short, for Wharton, the ideal critical discourse would unfold via the same communication situation that characterizes the scene of creation—that is to say, just as Edith Wharton views a fiction writer as corresponding with the

‘dispassionate and ironic critic that dwells within the breast,’ so, too, does she exhort literary critics to correspond with novelists.

Wharton conceives of the ineluctable processes of reading and writing as indissociable and opaque: a writer sends a letter, a reader receives it, though ‘the sender may never know it’ (19), nor can the sender ever know the precise ways this textual message might move and affect her recipients, since these others, to whom the writer addresses her text, are essentially enigmatic. Laplanche sees the enigma of the addressee as a crucial characteristic of that which we call ‘art,’ which he defines as those forms of cultural address that are ‘situated from the first *beyond all pragmatics*’ (‘Transference’ 224):

The problem of the addressee, of the anonymous addressees, is an essential part of any description of the poetic situation. The addressee is essentially enigmatic, even if he sometimes takes on individual traits. So it is for Van Gogh’s Theo, who is as much an analyst without knowing it as is Fleiss for Freud, for behind him looms the nameless crowd, addressees of the message in a bottle.

Am I in the process, here, of describing an elitist phenomenon, the privilege of certain people, and not a constant human dimension? I do not think so. [...] What can be isolated here as characteristic of the cultural is an address to an other who is out of reach, to others ‘scattered in the future,’ as the poet says. An address which is a repercussion, which prolongs and echoes the enigmatic message by which the *Dichter* himself, so to speak, was bombarded [...]. 224

Just as the writer can never assimilate and exercise total mastery over the textual other, neither can she ever fully know or control readers’ responses to the letter that she is sending. Thus at no point is the practice of fiction a transparent process. The writer can never fully know the ‘core’ of the letter she sends (the textual other). Likewise, a writer can never fully know or predict *exactly* how or where, these addressees will find the necessary responses to their questions (‘what am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does it contain for me?’) in the letter of the text (WF 23). A writer can only know what that *other*

(reading) self who dwells elsewhere *within her own consciousness* ('that dispassionate and ironic critic who dwells within the breast') might respond (BG 212).

Additionally, as with any of the processes reasoned out in *The Writing of Fiction*, the letter (text) and the recipient (readers) are not wholly separate entities. The writer does not form an impenetrable barrier between these two sites of inscription and reception—for in attending to *both* the textual other and the other(s) to whom the text is addressed (readers), in performing this double movement, the writer allows the textual other/fictional subject to occasion and shape *how* it is addressed to readers: 'the mode of presentation to the reader, that central difficulty of the whole affair, must always be determined by the nature of the subject' (WF 54). And indeed, 'affair' seems an apt word to describe this dynamic, for this process, which Wharton refers to as 'transposition' (16), involves a triangular relation among three subjects—writer, text, reader.

But what, then, is the precise nature of this 'transposition' process? What happens when the fictional subject is translated into language, into a letter addressed to readers? What constitutes the act of re-presentation—'that central difficulty in the whole affair'? What is the writer *doing*, exactly? Before exploring this process of translation, Wharton explains what literary representation is *not*: 'It has been so often said that all art is re-presentation—the giving back in conscious form of the shapeless raw material of experience' (16), but any such 're-presentation' involves a 'conscious ordering and selecting' on the part of the writer because 'attempt to give back any fragment of life [...] presupposes transposition, 'stylization' ' (16). This reference to 'stylization', in fact, circles back to the question posed above: what is involved in this

‘transposition’ process? Grasping what this process entails involves a careful examination of ‘stylization’, for the two are inextricably linked.

For Wharton, style is not ornament. It is not a process wherein the writer goes back through a fictional text and pretties up the prose with a decorative application of imagistic flourishes and sonorous lyricism. Style, for Wharton, is a process inextricable from transposing other aspects of the fictional subject. It is the result of the writer performing ‘the necessary work of selection [...], and selection in the long run must eventually lead to the transposition of the subject, the ‘stylization,’ of the subject,’ which Wharton defines as the way events, characters, settings and narrative descriptions are ‘grasped and coloured by their medium, the narrator’s mind, and given back in his words [...] Style in this definition is discipline’ (21).

The process of stylization, the way the writer translates (or transposes) the fictional subject into language, involves yet another actor who, as it turns out, is also on stage during the scene of signification—an actor whom Wharton here calls the ‘medium,’ but is more commonly referred to as the narrator, or, to use Wharton’s broader term, the story-teller. This story-teller is the ‘medium’ through which the text is transmitted to the reader, and as such, guides the writer in her process of selection. It is the story-teller—that ordering consciousness a writer constructs through which to deliver a narrative—that effects the ‘transposition’ of the fictional subject into language. Thus narrative voice is not just an inert passageway through which the narrative is delivered, but an integral part of the narrative as well (16).

But how does the writer go about selecting/constructing this consciousness? How does a writer know what narrative voice would be best

suited to translate a particular fictional subject into language? According to Wharton, the writer proceeds the way a critic must when faced with a garden, the façade of a cathedral, or any other enigma that provokes her—by asking questions: ‘Who saw this thing I am going to tell about? By whom do I mean that it shall be reported? It seems as though such questions must precede any study of the subject chosen, since the subject is conditioned by the answer’ (35). Here again, Wharton figures the process as dialogic, for the fictional subject is translated according to responses given to questions the writer poses *to the fictional subject itself*, since ‘the mode of presentation to the reader, that central difficulty of the whole affair, *must always be determined by the nature of the subject*’ (54 italics mine). As a result, the process of translation (or stylization) is an analytic dialogue, a series of questions and responses. Thus, in a sense, writing a literary text is an epistolary exchange or correspondence between fictional subject and writer—both of whom are ineluctably other unto themselves.

Narrative voice is an example of this inter-locutionary dynamic.

According to Wharton, narrative voice is the result of a conversation among several indiscrete entities: a reading self, a writing self, a fictional subject. As a result, Wharton’s story-teller is the *medium* through which the writer transmits and the reader receives the message of the text, but this medium is also *an ineffable part of the message itself*. For insofar as the medium is inspired and instituted by the ‘answer’ the fictional subject gives to questions posed by the writer, any narrator is thus the voice that reads the letter to the reader *and* an

ineluctable part of the message itself¹¹. Wharton explains this message-medium dynamic through a characteristic piling up of metaphors:

One more thing is needful [...] and that is, never to let the character who serves as reflector record anything not naturally with his register. It should be the story-teller's first care to choose this reflecting mind deliberately, as one would choose a building-site, or decide upon the orientation of one's house, and when this is done, to live inside the mind chosen, trying to feel, see and react exactly as the latter would, no more, no less, and, above all, no otherwise. Only thus can the writer avoid attributing incongruities of thought and metaphor to his chosen interpreter. (WF 36)

Within the space of a few sentences, the entity commonly called a 'narrator' morphs from a mirror ('reflector') to a 'building-site' to a 'mind' the writer must 'live inside' then, finally, to a 'chosen interpreter.' As these concurrent metaphors imply, this medium does not merely transmit; it reflects surface appearances (as a mirror does), experiences more hidden realms of feeling, seeing, and reacting (as a mind does), and translates all these internal-external responses (as an interpreter does) in order to effect corresponding responses in readers, those addressees to whom the letter of this textual representation is sent. Thus the substance of this letter, what readers receive, should not be a mere coinage of 'the life we know' (85). As readers, we ought 'not feel ourselves to be in a resuscitated *real world* (a sort of Tussaud Museum of wax figures with actual clothes on), but in that other world which is the image of life transposed in the brain of the artist, a world wherein the creative breath has made all things new' (59). A text should not be an inverted symmetrical same, but a *transposition* or 'stylization' of its subject, for, as Wharton explains,

¹¹ Not to mention the fact that the fictional subject, that which is answering these questions posed by the writer, is itself an inter-subjective site shaped by the extent to which the writer 'reacts to' the soliciting subject, as has been previously discussed.

a fictional text 'reaches and moves us through its *resemblance* to the life we know' (italics mine; 85), not through an exact replication of it.

To practice fiction is thus to practice interpretation. And interpretation means to shade, color and inflect, not to re-produce or attempt transparent meaning. And, above all, to interpret means to select: 'the assumption that their very unsorted abundance constitutes in itself the author's subject [...] this attempt to note down every half-aware stirring of thought and sensation, the automatic reactions to every passing impression' is, according to Wharton, the gravest mistake a writer can make (13). She cites the rapid passing away of stories by a certain turn-of-the-century school of writers who adopted a slice-of-life (*tranche de vie*) theory of writing as proof that exact 'photographic reproduction' kills textual vitality for readers:

the once-famous *tranche de vie*, the exact photographic reproduction of a situation or an episode, with all its sounds, smells, aspects realistically rendered, but with its deeper relevance and its suggestions of a larger whole either unconsciously missed or purposely left out [...] one sees that those among this group of writers who survive are still readable in spite of their constructing theory, or in proportion as they forgot about it once they closed with their subjects. [...] As for the pupils, the mere conscientious appliers of this system, they have all blown away with the theory. (12)

Thus, for Wharton, both reading and writing involve interpretation. And interpretation, whether of a 'fictional subject' or a novel, ought not to involve 'mere conscientious appliers' of a system or a set of 'ready-made' axioms. Critics and novelists cannot simply adopt a bundle of principles and apply them to whatever they aim to interpret. In other words, for Wharton, both events (critical and creative) involve a communication situation. Writing literary texts installs individuals in a transferential dynamic, much like reading literary texts

does, and if one is going to know the subject in question, to any legitimate degree, a 'Copernican' procedure that proceeds by asking questions is necessary.

But as in any process of translation, there will always be an excess, some degree of meaning that does not get explicitly included in the translation. This excess that writer does not include, or select, constitutes the 'untranslated remainder' whose force must be allowed to continually exert its pressure on the writer, reminding her that 'what I don't know [...] I sense—endlessly—that I don't really know' ('Inspiration' 45). It is this, in a sense, that gives a text its unconscious, that renders it other-unto-itself and thus sufficiently enigmatic to provoke and compel readers. Phrased otherwise, the process of translation that the writer employs must be one that '*preserves the sharp goad of the enigma*' that is the fictional subject (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 45). While it is repressed, to some degree, from the literary text (the translation), the nature of this repression must not consist of 'not wanting to know.' In other words, it cannot be fully exiled by the writer. It must be allowed to continue haunting her and impinging upon her. Thus the effectiveness of the product, a novel, is inextricable from the process its writer employs. For this reason, Wharton's treatise discusses the 'practice of fiction.' For her, the nature of one's practice (the finding out how to) and the quality of one's product (novel) are inextricable. In other words, what Wharton articulates, quite explicitly, is a creative process that follows to Laplanche's 'third' vicissitude, an analytic procedure that 'maintains a type of *opening up*. This opening-up can be maintained, transferred into other fields of otherness and of inspiration' ('Inspiration' 50).

Wharton's discussion of *The House of Mirth* in *A Backward Glance* illustrates this dynamic. Here, she describes the time during which she was

preparing to write the novel as one of investigation, and this investigation takes a particular form:

There it [fashionable New York] was before me, in all its flatness and futility, *asking* to be dealt with [...]

The problem was how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another. *In what aspect* could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the "old woe of the world", any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? *The answer* was that a frivolous society can acquire significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was Lily Bart. (207 italics mine)

The creative process begins with a solicitation, as a subject interpellates the writer, 'asking to be dealt with.' In response to this provocation, the writer asks a question, in this particular case: how can such a superficial subject [fashionable New York] have greater significance than its own petty concerns? In other words, how can it be made to indicate or strain towards questions beyond its own borders? Wharton proceeds by asking questions, and the 'answer' that emerges is Lily Bart. Thus a character is a *response* to a question posed by the author, a question generated by the subject that initially provoked her [fashionable New York], 'asking to be dealt with.' A subject asks to be dealt with, the author responds with a question, which yields a further response 'Lily Bart' which, according to the procedure Wharton outlines in *The Writing of Fiction*, must initiate further questioning, as the writer must then engage in further interrogative dialogic activity to ascertain point-of-view, voice, style, ending... and so on and so forth. In other words, here is the transferential dynamic—in which inquiry yields some measure of closure (Lily Bart), but then gives way to a further process of questioning (what does this character look like? What is her history? How does she speak? And so on), which yields a further

degree of closure, then another question, which must be transferred, and so on and so forth. In addition to illustrating the dynamic that Wharton articulates in *The Writing of Fiction*, her discussion of *The House of Mirth* also illustrates what Laplanche means when he says ‘inspiration is conjugated via the other’ (‘Inspiration’ 48).

All of which spirals back to where this chapter began—for this is precisely the dynamic that also characterizes Wharton’s theorizing in *The Writing of Fiction*. In short, for Wharton, theorizing, critiquing, and writing fiction are all underpinned by a ‘Copernican’ dynamic in which the initial vector comes from the other. At its most effective, the practice of writing fiction proceeds via a process of investigation that involves asking questions. In other words, Wharton conceives the creative and critical processes that are crucial to creating fiction as proceeding via a ‘Copernican’ procedure that is largely interrogative, in which questions are asked and responses given, responses which provides some degree of closure, but which, in turn, give way to another question (or set of questions) that is transferred and so on and so forth, resulting in either a treatise on the writing of fiction, or a novel—depending on the nature of the subject and of the kinds of questions being asked. The point is that—whether the text that results is to be critical, creative, or theoretical—the method, in either case, is the same.

Conclusion

In the only contemporary scholarly article exclusively devoted to *The Writing of Fiction*, Frederick Wegener claims that *The Writing of Fiction* was promptly, and so far permanently, subordinated to Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* due to Wharton’s gender (‘Difficult Writing’ 73-4). Given the upsurge

of feminist approaches to literature over the past several decades, one could hardly explain contemporary scholars' silence on Wharton's treatise the same way. Or can one?

In its refusal to 'consciously lay down rules' in favor of attempting to 'measure and reason out' the processes involved in creating fiction, *The Writing of Fiction* resembles 'that strange chameleon-creature, the modern novel, which changes its shape and colour with every subject on which it rests' (WF 83 85 47). In other words, Wharton's strenuous effort to achieve consonance between subject and form—to allow her subject (the fluid practice of fiction) to determine the shape, tone, style, and structure of her treatise—has left *The Writing of Fiction* vulnerable to outright dismissal (in her own day) and relative neglect (in our own). Insofar as the 'practice of fiction' is 'fluid and dirigible,' Wharton's treatise, by engaging a corresponding fluidity of style, structure, and thought, is a highly complex work that defies classification and resists conventional forms of analysis. Endeavoring to explain the complex processes involved in creating a literary text—an entity that, due to its enigmatic nature, disrupts and unsettles its readers—Wharton has, it would seem, disrupted her own readers to such a degree that the value of her treatise has proved elusive.

According to Luce Irigaray, attempts to embrace fluidity and multiplicity as opposed to tidy univocity and fixed meaning will inevitably elude more phallogocentric critical and theoretical approaches—the very sorts of approaches that critics of Wharton's day adopted when reviewing the book. Discussing the critical reception of *The Writing of Fiction*, Frederick Wegener underscores the degree to which 'images of penetration and occupation' marked the reviews ('Difficult Writing' 73). One critic figured fiction as 'a gigantic virgin

continent' and remarked that Wharton 'makes not unladylike excursions into the surrounding jungle' (qtd. in 'Difficult Writing' 73). Wegener also notes the astounding number of references made to the book's physical dimensions ('this little volume' 'her little book' 'her little study'; qtd. in 'Difficult Writing' 73), while another reviewer celebrates the book's 'masculine brevity and clearness' (qtd. in 'Difficult Writing' 74).¹² Of course, implicit in this 'praise' is the assumption that repetition is feminine and undesirable. Overall, the gist of these reviews is rather odd: Wharton is praised for being 'masculine' insofar as her volume is concise, while simultaneously patronized for the diminutive size of her book. More recently, Wharton's treatise has been declared unsuccessful as a work of criticism and 'a pale reflection of Henry James's detailed explication of his art' (Vita-Finzi 32).

All of which is by way of saying that, as the explicit physicality and gendered nature of the language employed by reviewers in her own day illustrates, the critical discourse surrounding Wharton's *The Writing of Fiction* has always involved issues of sexual difference. As a result, bringing Luce Irigaray's theories of sexual difference (and its imbrications in linguistic and theoretical practice) to bear on Wharton's *The Writing of Fiction* is far from an irrelevant or extraordinary gesture. In fact, given the sexualized imagery of these early reviews, to ignore the question of sexual difference seems akin to ignoring the proverbial elephant in the living room.

I would like to suggest, therefore, that *The Writing of Fiction* attempts that which Luce Irigaray so fervently advocates. That is to say, I believe that Wharton's treatise, in endeavoring to articulate the fluid practice of fiction, ends

¹² R.W.B Lewis's 1975 biography reiterates this judgment, referring to *The Writing of Fiction* as 'a modest little book' (521).

up being an effort to speak outside Aristotelian rhetorical structures. It is an attempt to carve out an elsewhere from which to discuss practices that cannot be contained or adequately articulated via the very sorts of rhetorical structures her reviewers adamantly demanded—that is to say, a ‘thesis’ and ‘a closely-woven argument’ (qtd. in Wegener ‘Difficult Writing’ 73). There can exist, however, as Irigaray claims, another kind of ‘discursivity,’ one whose ‘“style” cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position’ (*This Sex* 79). Such a style would result from attempting to speak outside Aristotelian rhetorical structures. But what does it mean to claim that Wharton’s treatise is an attempt to speak outside Aristotelian rhetorical structures?

In an interview, Luce Irigaray once responded to this question with a series of her own questions, ‘Can female sexuality articulate itself, even minimally, within an Aristotelian type of logic? No. [...] But why would this situation be unchanging? Why can one not transcend this logic? To speak outside it?’ (‘Women’s Exile’ 82). Which, of course, begs the question: *how*? How, precisely, does one manage to ‘speak outside’? Where is this space, and how do we get there? Irigaray does not believe such a space can be effected through direct opposition to the *status quo*, or through a mere inversion of the present hierarchy—one that would place women in a dominant position over men, for that ‘amounts to the same thing in the end’ (*This Sex* 68).¹³ Nor does she think it can involve articulating an alternate theory of the subject via abstract philosophical principles: ‘the issue is not elaborating a new theory of which women would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical

¹³ Irigaray reiterates this conviction time and again throughout her writings. Most pointedly, in a 1975 question and answer seminar at the University of Toulouse, now published under the title “Questions”, she explains: “It clearly cannot be a matter of substituting feminine power for masculine power. Because this reversal would still be caught up in the economy of the same, in the same economy—in which, of course, what I am trying to designate as ‘feminine’ would not emerge” (129-30).

machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to a production of truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal' (78). The space cannot be found by demanding to speak and be heard as a (masculine) subject within a phallogocentric economy of meaning (76). Rather, Irigaray proposes that this space might be constituted 'elsewhere,' and that this 'elsewhere' can be elaborated 'only by *crossing back through the mirror that subtends all speculation*. [...] A playful crossing, and an unsettling one, which would allow woman to rediscover the place of her 'self-affection' in order to 'wrest the question away from the economy of the logos' (77 78).

I would suggest that *The Writing of Fiction* manages to wrest the question of creation—the question of the fluid practice of fiction—away from 'the economy of the logos' and, further, that this is why Wharton's insights have thus far proved elusive. Clearly, Edith Wharton did not consciously set out to disrupt what Irigaray calls 'the economy of logos.' Nothing, in fact, was probably further from her conscious intent. And yet, insofar as treating her subject, according to Wharton herself, involves leaving one's own conscious intent behind in order to attend and respond to the subject in question, then, clearly, the results of her treatise will, inevitably, exceed her own conscious intent. Just as the cathedrals at Amiens or Rheims or Beauvais or Bourges all take on meanings that exceed those their medieval builders intended, whether because of war damage or simply the inexorable passage of time, so, too, does Wharton's text mean 'more' than its creator intended. This excess of meaning, I would suggest, involves questions of sexual difference and how such issues impact linguistic and theoretical mechanisms, those signs by which critics, writers, and theorists must express themselves, that is to say, language itself. In

short, it does not matter whether or not Wharton set out to negotiate a space outside Aristotelian rhetorical structures from which to speak, *The Writing of Fiction* does just that.

By crafting a treatise that seeks to be consonant with its subject in every respect—that seeks to articulate the importance of maintaining the difference of the fictional subject—Wharton has created a text that is itself so different as to be un-re-cognizable. It is not Percy Lubbock's Jamesian *The Craft of Fiction*. Nor is it E.M. Forester's anti-Jamesian *Aspects of the Novel*. Both these books are mainstays of the canon, embraced as classic texts for understanding critical discourse in the early twentieth century. They are the two binaries through which two opposing strains of critical thought are taught to students, two texts seen as illustrative, in different ways, of New Criticism.

Wharton's *The Writing of Fiction*, however, corresponds to neither of these opposing critical poles. It is, in other words, unrecognizable, and as such, remains unknown outside Wharton studies. Little has effectively changed, in other words, since its publication eighty years ago. In 1925, most reviews compared Wharton's book unfavorably with Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (Wegener 'Difficult Writing' 73). The continued neglect of Wharton's treatise—its repression, in effect, from the history of literary criticism in America and from the history of critical writing by women—has perpetuated this initial injustice committed by the critics of her own day. Eighty years of silence has, in effect, left these initial assessments unrevised, allowing them to remain unanswered. This chapter has attempted to respond and, in responding, to revise them.

Rather than continue to compare *The Writing of Fiction* unfavorably with what is recognizable and familiar (Lubbock, Forester, and James), I have attempted to respond to the challenge of Wharton's treatise by following the critical procedure advocated in 'The Criticism of Fiction' and elsewhere. That is to say, since a process of recognition is not possible, this chapter has tried to engage in a process of cognition, which, as the first, chapter of this study demonstrated, requires adopting the kind of 'Copernican' procedure Wharton outlines in her critical writings. I have tried to discover what particular thing Wharton's treatise is trying to be and respond accordingly.

This approach yields a certain amount of critical closure, while also generating fresh questions. Primarily, it fosters an understanding of how Wharton conceived the practice of fiction, namely, as a complex process of discovery involving multiple entities whose otherness-unto-self must, at all times, be maintained if a literary text (that is to say, a text that is sufficiently enigmatic to interpellate and provoke readers for generations to come) is to be the result. Secondly, it illustrates the consonance between substance and form in *The Writing of Fiction*, which, in turn, reveals the degree to which Wharton's treatise is as 'fluid' as the practices it endeavors to articulate. Thirdly, in pursuing the question of fiction on its own terms, Wharton's treatise wrests the question of creation away from what Irigaray calls a linguistic 'economy of logos,' and, for this reason, I would suggest, *The Writing of Fiction* implicitly engages with questions of sexual difference, and, as a result, is a quintessentially 'feminist' text. Finally, Wharton's alternative approach, one that falls outside familiar and recognizable critical and theoretical parameters, goes a long way

towards explaining why her treatise has been dismissed, misunderstood, and neglected for the past eighty years.

All of which opens a fresh set of questions: to what degree can issues of sexual difference be traced throughout Wharton's critical practice and critical writings? Did the dismissive language critics used when reviewing *The Writing of Fiction*, with its implicit sexual subtext and gendered slights, exacerbate her own conception of the critical endeavor as inherently masculine—that is to say, can one locate an increased intensity of this attitude after 1925? To what degree might Wharton's anti-feminist statements, in fact, be compensating gestures of someone who felt her own femininity to be debilitating and wounding, given the language used by male reviewers when responding to the only substantial, book-length piece of criticism she ever wrote? In other words, to what degree was the fact of her femininity, for Wharton, traumatizing insofar as she was immersed in a world where critics offered praise by declaring her critical prose 'masculine,' while simultaneously deriding her 'little book' for not being Jamesian enough? And, might the tremendous anxiety that writing this treatise caused Wharton be linked to the arduous challenge of constructing an elsewhere from which to speak? In other words, insofar this book attempts what Luce Irigaray believes lies at the very heart of the feminist endeavor—that is to say, disrupting and unsettling linguistic procedures imbricated in women's oppression—was Edith Wharton a feminist after all?

Conclusion

Why did you spoil it? Because men and women are different,
because—in that respect—in the way of mental
companionship—what I can give you is so much less
interesting, less arresting, than what I receive from you? [...]
You hurt me—you disillusioned me—& when you left me I
was more deeply yours... Ah, the confused processes within
us! (671)

—Edith Wharton
*L'âme close*¹

What, then, is interpretation to Edith Wharton? It is not a set of axioms to be systematically applied, nor is it a fixed principle that can be easily articulated and tidily summarized. Rather, for Wharton, interpretation is an event, a practice, a process of discovery. It is an activity that informs every aspect of her life and work, from writing fiction to creating an Italian garden, from describing gothic cathedrals to reading Proust. It is a means by which she attempts to translate her fictional subjects into stories, to read and evaluate novels, and to view and appreciate visual art.

It is a method she advocates for critics and authors alike, though Wharton-the-critic was somewhat less successful in maintaining this procedure in the face of abstract critical questions. Her attempts to explore abstract questions tend to be compromised by 'Ptolemaic' lapses into gestures of centrifugal closure, during which she abandons the very procedure that she claims to be championing. That said, 'The Criticism of Fiction' is a fine example of the nuanced and subtle insights that emerge when Wharton does consistently engage this 'Copernican' procedure to explore abstract critical

¹ Edith Wharton's love diary, full text reproduced in Kenneth M. Price and Phyllis McBride's '“The Life Apart”: Texts and Contexts of Edith Wharton's Love Diary.' *American Literature* 66.4 (Dec. 1994): 663-688.

questions. In addition, when confronting particular works-of-art—whether they be novels, cathedrals, or gardens—Wharton generally manages to sustain the ‘Copernican’ interpretive procedure she advocates. As a result, her responses to particular works-of-art, from Amiens Cathedral to Proust’s novels, are most often acts of cognition, encounters that unsettle and refigure any preconceived assumptions, displacing those assumptions with fresh elaborations. Likewise, *The Writing of Fiction* is a sophisticated treatment of ‘the practice of fiction’ that offers striking insights into complex questions of difference, identity, and representation.

Interpretation, for Wharton, is an analytic method that involves the entire self, in all its ‘confused processes’ (*L’âme* 67). These processes are hardly discrete, resulting in a reliance on such paradoxical formulations as a ‘mind that feels’ or ‘the utterance of the unutterable’ (*MF* 178 17). Wharton’s method demands active resistance to tidy explanations, to the application of a ‘ready-made’ code, and to purely symbolic readings (*UCW* 161). Instead, Wharton advocates remaining open and available to the surprise of the other—whether that other is a cathedral, a theory, a garden, a novel, a fictional character, or a friend. Such openness entails risks (intellectual, emotional, moral, and physical), as her story of the typhoid relapse make clear. But allowing oneself to be dispossessed by the surprise of the other can also yield rich rewards—ecstatic moments wherein a reader is transported by ‘the sensuous rapture produced by the sounds and sight of words’ into ‘some strange supernatural realm,’ or when a traveler enters ‘a state where criticism perforce yields to sensation, where one surrenders one’s self wholly to the spell of its [Bourges Cathedral’s] spiritual

suggestion' ('Life and I' 1075; *MF* 70). Such moments of ecstatic dispossession, when the self is drawn into orbit around an other, are described and celebrated in nearly all of Wharton's critical writings. A particularly vivid and intimate description appears in 'Life and I,' the unpublished autobiographical fragment which also contains her story of the typhoid relapse. Here, Wharton describes the creative impulse as a gravitational 'pull' whose force was impossible to resist:

Never shall I forget the long-drawn weariness of the hours passed with "nice" little girls [...] I used to struggle as long as I could against my perilous obsession, & then, when the "pull" became too strong, I would politely ask my unsuspecting companions to excuse me while I "went to speak to mamma", & dashing into the drawing-room would pant out, "Mamma, please go & amuse those children. *I must make up.*" And in another instant I would be shut up in her bedroom, & measuring its floor with rapid strides, while I poured out to my tattered Tauchnitz the accumulated floods of my pent-up eloquence. Oh, the exquisite relief of those moments of escape from the effort of trying to "be like other children"! The rapture of finding myself again in my own rich world of dreams! I don't think I exaggerate or embellish in retrospect the ecstasy which transported my little body & soul when I shut myself in & caught up my precious Tauchnitz! (1076-7)

In the years to come, Edith Wharton would respond to this 'pull' in a somewhat different fashion. As an adult, she learned to proceed by asking questions—questions such as: how can fashionable New York strain toward a significance greater than its superficial inhabitants? what particular thing is this particular novel trying to be? what is the length and width of this its luminous zone? what forms of expression has each artistic tendency in this cathedral worked out for itself? can I fish up Marcel Proust's characters from the depths of my mind and thereby prove his creative genius? This interrogative and dialogic emphasis turns interpretation into a kind of conversation, an epistolary

correspondence between self and other in which two subjects, neither of whom is entirely discrete or stable, engage in a kind of 'intercourse' (MF 179). As Wharton figures them, both entities—self and other, fictional subject and novelist, traveler and cathedral, gardener and garden, reader and text—are heteronymous subjects in their own right. Each one (interpreter and interpretant) is other-unto-itself, multiple, divided, constituted by a set of 'confused processes' ('L'âme' 671). But these processes are never fully within the subject's own grasp, never hers to own, possess, or control. Gardens are vulnerable to the weather; cathedrals stand helpless in the face of fire and bombardments, while story-tellers are subject to an obsessive force that compels them to 'make up.'

Her explorations of these 'confused processes' within people produced some of the finest works of American literature. And her novels are widely recognized as such. But her detailed exploration of the 'confused processes' involved in writing fiction is less highly regarded, insofar as *The Writing of Fiction* is regarded at all. Indeed, her critical writing as a whole has been largely ignored by those outside Wharton studies, absent from the history of literary criticism in the United States and from anthologies of critical writing by women. But the neglect afforded to *The Writing of Fiction* is particularly unfortunate, given its deep engagement in questions of difference and interpretation, and engagement that is feminist in spirit, substance, and style.

Wharton's refusal to treat the complex dynamics involved in writing fiction through tidy, reductive formulations and her reliance on a recursive style and fluid structure have left *The Writing of Fiction* vulnerable to charges of

being 'random' and 'scattered' in her own time, 'confused and repetitious' in our own (CR 386; Vita-Finzi 46). Rather, *The Writing of Fiction* is, again, a feminist approach to theorizing in the Irigarayan sense of the term. That is to say, Wharton's treatise is feminist insofar as it ends up 'jamming the theoretical machinery itself [...] suspending its pretension to a production of truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal' (Irigaray, *This Sex* 78). More precisely, in attempting to articulate the fluid practice of fiction, *The Writing of Fiction* ends up effecting a space outside Aristotelian rhetorical structures from which to speak by disrupting, unsettling, and to a degree, revising these structures. Much as her visits to Nohant revised her understanding of George Sand by dissolving her initial associations and allowing fresh elaborations to emerge, *The Writing of Fiction*, by attempting to 'measure and reason out [the] processes' of this 'fluid' practice, wrests the question of creation away from what Irigaray calls 'the economy of logos' (WF 85 7; *This Sex* 78).

In *What Does A Woman Want: Reading and Sexual Difference*, Shoshana Felman claims that a feminist approach to interpretation would involve 'attempts to think out new procedures of approach, to listen in new ways' (7). Such a stance, she argues, 'opens up new ways of reading as concrete events (unique encounters with another's story) as pragmatic acts' (7-8). Towards such an end, Felman claims that her own book's 'enabling inspiration' is not 'theory per se but the production of a practice [...]. Practice does not institute its laws but shows us ways (that work or do not work: ways whose measure is not rightness but effectiveness)' (8). She defines 'effectiveness' as that which allows readers to see a text 'with fresh eyes' and as such it involves an act of 're-reading or re-

vision' (13). Felman's emphasis on reading as an as an event, on interpretation as a pragmatic act, on interpretive procedures that privilege listening, on practice over principle, on 'effectiveness' over theoretical 'rightness' resonates strongly with Wharton's critical writings. These, in fact, are all key characteristics of Wharton-the-critic at her best. The strategies and assumptions that Felman outlines as crucial to feminist critical practice are integral to the interpretive stance Wharton advocated and struggled to employ in the early part of the twentieth century.

As a result, Edith Wharton was, to my mind, an early practitioner of what today gets labeled 'feminist theory,' but which is, in fact, much more than a purely theoretical enterprise. Felman claims the kind of re-vision that Wharton advocates is necessary insofar as, without it, women's stories become invisible, in effect, 'missing' from history—whether it be the history of literature, of criticism, of philosophy, of the past. Without the sorts of strategies Wharton advocates and strains to practice, certain stories are excised from view, much as Stéphanie was excised from Balzac's story by the Gallimard/Folio critics. From this standpoint, Wharton's struggle to practice and defend her way of seeing is, in effect, an act of survival. Whether her 'new vision' involved looking beyond 'flower-loveliness' or allowing 'enfranchisement of thought [to] exist[s] in harmony with atavism of feeling,' Wharton felt compelled, time and again, to mount 'a somewhat courageous defence' of her way of seeing, experiencing, and interpreting the world (*WF* 17; *IG* 6; *MF* 10 179). If we accept Felman's claim, the constant pressure Wharton felt to mount her 'courageous defence' makes sense. Such a defense was necessary in order to avoid being subsumed by a

version of history that might very well have proven blind to her life, her work, her stories, her criticism, and her experiences. And if all this all sounds a bit hyperbolic, we would do well to remember that this has been the fate of *The Writing of Fiction*, a book whose insights have been overlooked, lost in the blind spots of a certain version of history.

A further word, then, on what constitutes Edith Wharton's way of seeing—or, more precisely, on the method by which she routinely tried 'to find out how to' see the subject that solicited her (*BG* 209). This study claims that at the heart of the interpretive procedure Wharton advocated and tried to practice (with mixed success at times) is a process of discovery initiated by the provocation of an enigmatic other. As such, her critical writings have numerous correspondences with Jean Laplanche's theory of subjective development. For that reason, this study has attempted to tease out and amplify these correspondences in order that they might, in turn, illuminate and expand one another. In so doing, I am not simply making the point that Wharton's critical writing anticipates certain strands of post-structuralist (particularly 'feminist') theory, though I believe she does. Rather, I have tried to use Laplanche's theories and terminology as clarifying supplements to Wharton's ideas, and vice versa, in order to make a host of (I hope) more subtle, interrelated points.

My first chapter explored the relation between Wharton's traumatic experience of reading ghost stories as a nine-year old child and Laplanche's theory of human subjective development. This discussion yielded the concept of 'Copernican' criticism—an interpretive stance that resists the all-too-natural impulse towards centrifugal closure that fixes a text into orbit around a reader's

(or critic's) 'foreknown answer' (Felman, 'Phallacy' 10). A 'Copernican' approach to literary texts aims to maintain the centripetal vector that initiated the interpretive event by achieving some measure of critical closure, while still allowing the '*sharp goad*' of the enigma to continue prodding readers, reminding them that what they don't know, they 'sense—endlessly—that [they] don't really know' (Laplanche, 'Inspiration' 45). In other words, 'Copernican' criticism attempts to respond to the enigma in a literary text by attempting to respond to, as opposed to answer, the question contained in that enigma. Such a response would resist closing this question off, opting instead to leave it open so that it might be transferred to an alternative site of inquiry.

It is in this final movement—the transference of the hollowed-out transference—where the critical and creative impulses merge. Laplanche explicitly makes this claim in 'Inspiration and/or Sublimation,' while it is implicit in much of Wharton's critical writing and gets dramatized in her novel, *Hudson River Bracketed*. In addition, this inextricability of the creative and the critical is articulated in *The Writing of Fiction*, which describes the scene of creation, the event of writing a literary text, as an act of interpretation. According to Wharton, the author must interpret (transpose, transmute, translate) the fictional subject that solicits her without subsuming it and reducing it to another part of self. A writer must resist, in other words, those tempting 'Ptolemaic' gestures that would reverse the centripetal dynamic that is the primary vector in creation, bringing the fictional subject into orbit around her self. A 'Copernican' approach is essential, though for entirely pragmatic reasons. If the text that emerges from this process is to be sufficiently enigmatic

to provoke and compel readers, it can only be so if it remains enigmatic to the writer, if 'that core of it' that is 'other' is maintained (WF 85).

Here, then, is a response to the question Laplanche opens in his article on transference: 'what, quite simply, drives the *Dichter*—*sit venia verbo*—to 'dicht'? Why create *in order to* communicate, and communicate through creating? And above all, why communicate *in this way*—that is, by addressing no-one, aiming beyond any determinate person?' ('Transference' 223). *The Writing of Fiction* offers a response to this question. According to Wharton's treatise, what drives the '*Dichter*' to 'dicht' is the provocation of an other. A fictional subject solicits an individual, 'asking for incarnation,' and that individual responds by translating it into a novel (WF 33).

And yet, Laplanche's question 'why communicate *in this way*?' remains unanswered. Why would anyone choose to address a message 'beyond any determinate person?' Surely, 'Copernican' responses can take other forms. Shoshana Felman's 'Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy,' is, I claim, an act of 'Copernican' criticism, a response to an enigma (Balzac's *Stéphanie*) that does not close that enigma off, but maintains its 'sharp goad' and reinscribes the centripetal vector that initiates the act of reading. 'Copernican' responses to enigmas need not transpire in the imaginative realm. Why, then, would a writer write ' *in this way*—by addressing no one, aiming beyond any determinate person?' ('Transference' 223).

This study began with an uncanny story of reading, a passage Wharton wrote and then repressed from the final version of her autobiography. It is a story of trauma and disease, of indelible psychic change and childhood fear. It is

a story of radical ‘Copernican’ openness, of a nine-year old child’s inability to sufficiently bind that which traumatizes her. According to Laplanche, such extreme psychic openness is akin to a patient’s body being left unsutured in the wake of an operation (‘Inspiration’ 50). And, indeed, the consequences were highly destructive for the nine-year old Wharton: midnight book-burnings and paralyzing phobias that lasted until she was twenty-eight years old. Laplanche would argue that what the young Wharton lacked was a container, something to act as a ‘counter-balance to this force of unbinding’ (‘Transference’ 227).

Wharton’s twenty-eighth year was marked by a significant event. On May 26, 1890, she received an envelope addressed to her from the editor, Edward Burlingame. Inside was a letter explaining that *Scribners Magazine* wanted to publish her story “Mrs. Mainstay’s View” (Lewis 61). That same year, her twenty-eighth, she found herself, for the first time since the typhoid relapse, able to sleep in a room with a book of ghost-stories. Had the twenty-eight year old Edith Wharton, then, found the container she needed, a force to counter-balance the unbound enigmatic signifier, a procedure through which she might partially bind ‘It’?

A Backward Glance offers a detailed account of the fate of the enigmatic signifiers that haunted her in the years to come:

A still more spectral element of my creative life is the sudden appearance of names without characters [...] a name to which I can attach no known association of ideas force[s] itself upon me in a furtive shadowy way, [...] hanging about obstinately for years in the background of my thoughts. The Princess Estradina was such a name. I knew nothing of its origin, and still less of the invisible character to whom it presumably belonged. Who was she, what were her nationality, her history, her claims on my attention? She must have been there, lurking and haunting me, for

years before she walked into “The Custom of the Country”, in high-coloured flesh and blood, cool, dominant and thoroughly at home.
(BG 202)

Unlike her response to ‘It,’ she responds to the hollow of these enigmatic signifiers with questions (Who is she? What are her claims on my attention?), then transfers that hollow—the enigmatic signifier that signifies to her, without signifying of anything—to an alternative site of inquiry, namely, a novel. Provoked by the centripetal pull of these spectral names to which she can ‘attach no known association of ideas,’ Edith Wharton learns to respond not by burning books, but by writing them.

So, as to Laplanche’s unanswerable question—‘why create *in order to* communicate, and communicate through creating?’—perhaps, for Edith Wharton, it was simply a question of survival.